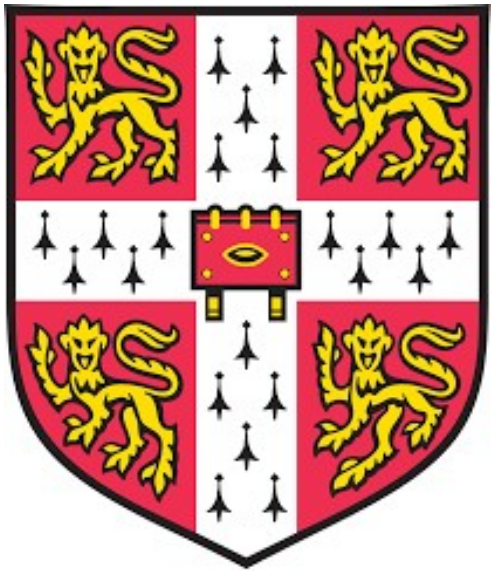
Critical encounters:
Bataille, Blanchot and the literary real



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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Modern and Medieval Languages Degree Committee.

Abstract

Zoi Angeli

Critical Encounters: Bataille, Blanchot and the literary real

The overall aim of this thesis is to examine the encounter of the real and literature – as thematically crystallized in the contrivance of the literary real – in terms of an irreducible tension. The encounter of literature and the real (their coexistence and inseparability) is examined conjointly with the encounter (the meeting and interlinking) of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot – as generated by the comparative angle that structures the thesis.

The literary real addresses both the question of what kind of 'real' is involved and disclosed in writing (and how that might differ from reality in its more traditional sense – or more precisely from more conventional representations of reality), as well as the question of writing's own 'being' (that is, the particularity of its mode of being, its peculiar reality/unreality).

The thesis aims to provide a renewed (and overlooked) reading of both thinkers as situated at the crossroads of post-deconstruction (welcoming the real, experience) and anti-realism (differentiating the real from – its equation and reduction to – empirical reality and the current state of affairs). In parallel, and more broadly, the project, via Bataille and Blanchot, calls for a recasting of key terms of the literary and aesthetic tradition (such as creation and inspiration, autonomy and mimesis), but also of concepts relevant to wider current debates, such as space, inside and outside, time, experience and the event, visibility and invisibility, intimacy and distance.

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Introduction

Ce qui est dit une fois d'un côté, est redit une deuxième fois de l'autre côté et non pas seulement réaffirmé mais (parce que il y a reprise) élevé à une forme d'affirmation nouvelle où, changeant de place, la chose dite entre en rapport avec sa différence, devient plus aiguë, plus tragique, non pas plus unifiée, mais au contaire suspendue tragiquement entre deux poles d'attraction. (Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*)

The overall aim of this thesis is to examine the encounter of the real and literature – as thematically crystallized in the contrivance of the literary real –in terms of an irreducible tension. The encounter of literature and the real (their coexistence and inseparability) is examined conjointly with the encounter (the meeting and interlinking) of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot – as generated by the comparative angle that structures the thesis. The investigation into the literary real revolves around two slopes which are constantly entwined: the first deals with the question of the way in which literature (writing) engages with and contemplates on human reality, perceives and depicts, transforms, renounces or neglects worldly existence, while the second focuses on the question of the reality of writing itself, of the particular mode of being of the literary, as posed in the old but persistent inquiry 'What *is* literature?'. Briefly, the literary real addresses both the question of what kind of 'real' is involved and disclosed in writing (and how that might differ from reality in its more traditional sense – or more precisely from more conventional representations of reality), as well as the question of writing's own 'being' (that is, the particularity of its mode of being, its peculiar reality/unreality).

The focus of the thesis is how Bataille and Blanchot – the first through an exposure to the violent disorder of life, the second through a passionate meditation on literature and language – reconfigure our common understanding of the terms 'being', 'existence' and 'real', as well as 'literature' and writing and, more importantly, how they radically alter the way we usually think on their relation. As I will show, both thinkers bring out a radical notion of writing which breaks with all representational logic, as it does not reflect a pre-given reality, and which entails an understanding of the real, of being, as inappropriable and ungraspable. In doing so, they make of writing an encounter with a dimension of existence that is excessive, outside phenomenological disclosure and ontological discerning, and outworldly, beyond the logic (itself worldly) of transcendence and immanence. Thus, the real of literature is a strange and paradoxical suspension of the representation (or the presentation) of worldly existence and literature is an exposure to (and an imbrication with) a 'real' which exceeds (and is anterior to)

all appearance and manifestation as such – it is in this sense that one can speak of a 'literary real'.

Bataille and Blanchot, as I will argue, conceive writing as a sovereign realm, not subordinate to worldly (social) causes and, thereby, by its very disengagement, as deeply engaged with the world (in its more fundamental sense, in its more hidden aspects). In that respect, their account on writing is suspended between the Hegelian dismissal of the literary intellectual, who in a mere display of his natural, inherent talent remains completely detached from the world, and the Sartrean praise of the writer, whose writing incarnates the highest form of worldly commitment and therefore remains wedded to positivistic values and goals.

Bataille, when writing, revolves around an excessive experience that touches upon the limit(lessness) of the self and affirms the whole of existence. Blanchot privileges writing, since for him, from it emanates an experience of the world as it slips from the appropriative grasp of the subject, an experience of radical exteriority, which he calls *le dehors*. However, and this is a key claim I will make here, as for Bataille and Blanchot writing involves an encounter with what is excessive and inappropriable, they both insinuate an asymmetrical, an asymptotic relation between the two, namely a relation that diverges from the conventional meaning of the term (a relation without relation as Blanchot will say – but one that is thereby the condition of any and all relationality per se). As a result, writing for both, as I will demonstrate, becomes bound to loss, expenditure, withdrawal, absence and is willingly described in terms of failure, imposture, privation, incompleteness and, more importantly, impossibility. In that regard, I will examine how in their works the referential capacity of language is undermined, derisively in Bataille, serenely in Blanchot, and how what is written gestures towards an outside, which is suggested but not fully contained within it. Throughout the study, I show how the demands of the real (meant both in terms of resistance and corporeality) are already operative in Blanchot's and Bataille's conception of the literary; additionally, I show how writing both addresses and questions what counts as real. As writing is suspended between an affirmative and a questioning attitude, it distances itself both from the pole of autonomy (relishing its own logic and in its separate place) and from the pole of subversion (being reduced to a critical tool), thereby offering a radical rethinking of the key question of relation, a question as old as thought itself.

A number of influential concepts that have decisively – and to a certain extent irrevocably – marked the trajectory of thought bear on the broader question of relation. Relations and modes

of relating have been, in various ways, the central preoccupation of thought. The constitutive distinction of metaphysics between the sensible and the intelligible the apparent and the essential, what we perceive (see, hear, grasp) and what truly (really?) 'is' is introduced in the Platonic theory of ideal forms. In Plato's *Republic* the opposites are not only designated in the hierarchical terms of the fundamental and the derivative but also in terms of visual semblance or, more broadly, of participation. The relation between ideas and material forms, thought and matter, human freedom and natural constraints is also at the heart of the Kantian notion of presentation, inasmuch as the latter consists precisely of the problem of coordination (coarticulation) between sensible forms and ideas. The Kantian category of the aesthetic in the *Third Critique* aims at uniting the sensuous and intelligible, inasmuch as a rose, in its beauty, stands in and presents or, in terms closer to the Kantian lexicon, is the sensibilization of the idea of freedom in nature – an idea that would otherwise not be present within the domain of the sensible.[1] From a more worldly and historical perspective and in an attempt to remodel reality as a dynamic process, the intersection (the inter-action) between freedom and nature, between the subject and the given is glossed by Hegel in terms of negation. Hegelian negation becomes synonymous with reality, as the human world consists precisely in – and emerges through – interaction.[2]

The spatial and cognitive distinction between an intending subject (here, within) and an intended object (there, outside) is suspended by the phenomenological insistence on phenomena and appearances (rather than real things in themselves). More broadly, after the Nietzschean attack on metaphysics, the problem of sensible experience displaces the Kantian problem of sensibilization of ideas. In this regard, in the post-Nietzschean context, the problem of presentation is subsequently recast, most notably by Heidegger, not in the technical and epistemological terms of coordination between ideas and sensible forms but in the ontological terms of originary experience. The problem of the world we are left with is raised by Nietzsche in the final lines of 'How the True World Finally became a Fable', as follows: 'The true world – we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! With the

[1] For an outline of the stakes of the Third Critique, see Alison Ross, *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy. Presentation in Kant, Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2007), 38–47. The Kantian category of the aesthetic and the key term of aesthetic judgement are not synonymous nor reducible to the realm of art and artworks but refer primarily to the beauty of nature. In Romantic thought, where presentation becomes an ontological (rather than an epistemological, technical) problem (as it was for Kant) and is endowed with existential stakes, the artwork becomes both a realization and an activation of human freedom.

[2] Subsequently, Hegelian negativity is unbound from the realm of action and the force of negation – in its capacity to critically engage with the world – is freed to move into the realm of art, informing thereby various theorizations of modern art and literature.

true world we have also abolished the apparent one.'[3] The question of presentation subsequently becomes that of making sense of – and relating to – worldly existence (being, the sensible, that which is), while avoiding the binary structure of opposition (that opposes the sensible to the intelligible) or phenomenological reduction (that privileges the apparent against the real and dissolves reality by reducing it to an image of our consciousness).

The intellectual world from which Bataille's and Blanchot's works derive is described by Foucault, who often brings the two writers together and is influenced by both, as marked by the passage from the limit of the limitless (God) to the limitless reign of the limit (our intrinsic finitude).[4] However, as Foucault underlines, this is not to be considered as a limited and positivistic world ('un monde limité et positif'), but rather as 'un monde qui *se dénoue* dans l'expérience de la limite'.[5] Simon Critchley, drawing on the implications for literature of such a philosophical outlook, remarks that literature becomes 'the name of the place where the issue of religious disappointment is thought through'.[6] According to Critchley, 'it is *in* and *as* literature that the issue of life's possible redemption is played out' (more precisely the 'redemption from redemption', as he will add).[7] Similarly, the task of, at the time, future thought – now, contemporary thought – is articulated by Sontag in the following terms: 'to try to make a fresh way of talking at the most serious, ardent, and enthusiastic level, heading off the religious encapsulation'.[8] Responding to the challenges of their time, which are still ours, Bataille, (un)working the Nietschean and Hegelian (Kojevian) legacy, and Blanchot, cross-fertilising Heidegger and Levinas, displace, as I will demonstrate, the transcendental 'beyond' of religion in the intensity of the experience of writing. For both, it is in writing, both within and outside it, both presented and withdrawn in the same movement, that appears a (non-transcendental) beyond, where meaning is not guaranteed but shudders. Yet, while Blanchot's confident allegiance to literature might be seen as lending itself at times to a conception of literature along the lines of negative transcendence (inasmuch as it bears the longing for an absolute which always, somehow, slips away), and Bataille's turbulent relation with writing engenders a tragic vision, in which redemption is always already scattered and parodied, what

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of Idols* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and transl. Walter Kaufmann (London, New York: Penguin, 1954, 1982), 463–564 (485).
[4] Michel Foucault, 'Preface à la transgression', *Critique* 195–196 (août-septembre), 1963, 751–69 (754).
[5] Ibid. (my emphasis).
[6] Simon Critchley, *Very Little … Almost Nothing*, 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), xx, xxiii (my emphasis).
[7] Ibid.
[8] Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination', *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Penguin, 1966), 69.

is crucial for both is that the logic (and attempt) of representation is undermined without being replaced by the logic (and temptation) of grounding and originality, since the primal scene of writing is conceived as a failure of discourse and as an encounter with an overriding alterity.

The comparative angle of the project, rather than tracing influence, aims to underline aspects of both thinkers that would otherwise remain unobserved, showing how we sense them differently through their exposure to one another. Without aspiring to foster Bataille as a theorist of literature and Blanchot as a theorist of the real, my reading primarily focuses on the representational and literary stakes of the Bataillean operations and on the way in which Blanchot's several definitions of literature redefine existence. Directing my attention to how Bataille's uncompromising commitment to the experience of the real (and the real of experience), which can be for the moment defined as that which is beyond the order of representation, *exerts pressure on* writing and literature, my reading differs decisively from the approach adopted by the theorists of *écriture*, namely *Tel Quel*, Derrida and, more recently, ffrench, who enclose and consider the Bataillean operations – of excess, expenditure, sacrifice (or exposure) – *in and as writing*. Additionally, and conversely, since in the case of Blanchot the existence of literature makes demands on and challenges existence, the thesis explores how the Blanchotian fervent allegiance to literature and writing offers precious insights into the theorization of the real. In this respect, the chronological unfolding of the sections on Blanchot does not provide a historical narrative of Blanchot's several definitions of literature as they develop from the 1940's onwards, but rather examines, from a synchronic perspective, how they offer a reconfiguration of existence in terms of extreme affirmation (in the case of the *il y a*), concealment and obscurity (in the case of the *other night*), doubleness, impersonality and indeterminacy (in the case of the *neuter*).

In the case of Bataille and Blanchot, one cannot make the claim that not much has been written. Yet, in the substantial body of monographs, commentaries and comparative studies the question of relation concentrates more on the intricate interplay between two modes of writing and discourse as revealed and activated in their hybrid, unclassified work. Eleanor Kaufman's original essay *The Delirium of Praise* devotes one chapter to the textual inscription of the Blanchot-Bataille friendship as reflected in their praise for each other.[9] Yet, as the title indicates, it is a genre study meditating upon laudatory essay as a singular, excessive, mode of

[9] Eleanor Kaufman, *The Delirium of Praise: Bataille, Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, Klossowski* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

writing that contradicts standard critical, measured, discourse. Similarly, Leslie Hill's discerning study on Blanchot and Bataille, *Writing at the Limit*, focuses on the intersection of literary practice with philosophical discourse, the redefinition of the latter through its contaminative interaction with the former and provides a powerful defence of literary writing as a relation to the limit(less).[10] Other studies are devoted to central themes within the work of Bataille and Blanchot and how they need to be worked though (Patrick ffrench's *After Bataille. Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* is indicative in this respect, as it is centred around the motif of 'sacrifice' and its recasting in terms of exposure rather than in terms of a structure).[11] This study differentiates itself from existing scholarship as, moving away from the consideration of writing as a different, renewed way of thinking and bringing it together with the question (and questioning) of the real, it insists on the fact that writing might offer critical and resourceful insights on the theorization of the real, in the case of Blanchot, and that the demands of the real reinsert and revitalize questions of representation, referentiality and figuration, in the case of Bataille. In this sense, this study develops out of, and contributes to, a recent emergence within French thought which, in the wake of deconstruction, turns away from the linguistic paradigm and its emphasis on discourse in order to address materiality, worldly existence and the concreteness of the real.

The conception of the 'literary real' steers a more nuanced middle path between the anti-postmodern readings of Bataille, which celebrate his incitement for an unmediated experience of the real, and the more textualist readings, which insist on the self-referentiality of the Bataillean operations and the impossibility of reference. Similarly, the 'literary real', with reference to Blanchot, counters the readings of him as aristocratically distanced from real existence and, thereby, a conception of the literary as disconnected from the concerns of lived (real) existence. The project outlines how Bataille's and Blanchot's conception of the real/'being'/existence in terms of the excessive and the inappropriable is a cross-fertilization of the philosophy of their predecessors (Hegel/Kojève, Nietzsche), a radicalization of the philosophy of their contemporaries (most notably, Sartre and Heidegger) and a forerunner of the post-modern attraction to unmastered negativity and the impossibility of closure. Bringing into focus Bataille's and Blanchot's engagement with the sensory and sense, it situates them both within the current context of the material/affective turn. In doing so, it aims to provide not a historical – linear – narrative but a renewed reading of both thinkers as situated at the

[10] Leslie Hill, *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
[11] Patrick ffrench, *After Bataille. Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007).

crossroads of post-deconstruction (welcoming the real, experience) and anti-realism (differentiating the real from – its equation and reduction to – empirical reality and the current state of affairs). In parallel, and more broadly, the project, via Bataille and Blanchot, calls for a recasting of key terms of the literary and aesthetic tradition (such as creation and inspiration, autonomy and mimesis), but also of concepts relevant to wider current debates, such as space, inside and outside, time, experience and the event, visibility and invisibility, intimacy and distance.

Part One adopts a historical perspective and is the only one constructed around the first encounter (both real and textual) between the two thinkers. Drawing on their early theoretical texts of the 1930's and 1940's, while juxtaposing the Bataillean privileging of embodied experience to the Blanchotian literary experience and the Bataillean notion of 'unemployed negativity' to the Blanchotian 'il y a', it examines the reconfiguration of experience in terms of the impossible and the inappropriable. Part Two, the core of the thesis, provides an analysis of Blanchot's and Bataille's major critical texts of the 1950's dedicated to literature, *L'Espace littéraire* and *La Littérature et le mal*, respectively, and tackles more directly the question of how literature becomes a privileged way of relating to the world. Bringing together (in a confrontational – both agonistic and intimate – manner) Blanchot's account of the spatiality of the literary work with Bataille's account of its temporality, it aspires to fill a gap not only in existing scholarship but also, and more crucially, in the dialogue between the two. In this respect, the Blanchotian paradigm of writing, which counteracts the logic of creation and creativity, is accompanied and complemented by the Bataillean a-teleological logic, which runs against salvation and redemption. Additionally, drawing on the sensory and tactile aspect of the Blanchotian image (as opposed to the common conception of it as a form of mediation) as well as on the transient and fleeting character of the Bataillean present (as opposed to its positing in terms of presence), Part Two insists on the problematization of presence, origin and telos. Finally, psychoanalytic discourse is brought in as a third pole, a critical stance, which results in reframing the Blanchotian imaginary from the viewpoint of the Lacanian real, as well as reframing psychoanalytic theory from the viewpoint of writing.

Part Three expands on the spectral logic of the double which pervades the argument of the study as a whole, though addressed in different ways – most notably, in Blanchot's several spatial accounts of literature (in terms of two slopes, spacing and passage) or in Bataille's economic account of existence (in terms of excess, waste, expenditure rather than exchange). In order to show how Bataille's and Blanchot's central concerns might be seen as the

problematization of the idea of the one, under its different configurations of origin, unity, identity, totality, end, the problematic of the *neuter* is put forward, with reference to Blanchot, as a figure from which one can address the question of irreducible doubleness (which undoes both sameness and radical alterity) and the key term of the 'mask' is employed, with reference to Bataille, as a concept which reconfigures mimesis in terms of incongruity and separation. This spectral, yet fundamental, logic of the double, gives my discussion both its thematic content and its structure: as each part points to a revolt against, and calls into question, identity and presence (double dissymmetries, confusions and (re)turns), it is divided and doubled, treated conjointly and differently, by a chapter devoted to Bataille and a chapter devoted to Blanchot. As the comparative perspective of the ensuing chapters will show, the concept of the literary real emerges more forcefully when *not* treated in isolation.

PART I: DOUBLE DISSYMMETRIES

Alongside a strong affinity for fostering writing as a heteronomic practice where something 'other' can affirm itself, Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot share some crucial differences. These differences appear to some extent, along with their common preoccupations, in the thread of their works of the 1930's and the 1940's that precede *La Littérature et le mal* and *L'Espace littéraire,* their major works of the 1950's devoted to literature. Schematically, Bataille's early works draw on the demand made on writing by the exposure, his exposure, to the world's and man's chaotic reality (due to his engagement with the findings of other disciplines – anthropology, sociology, ethnology – and his own turbulent life). In an inverse movement, Blanchot addresses in his works the question posed to being by the existence of literature, by the peculiar mode of being of the literary (due to his exposure and his fervent devotion to writing as a writer and a literary critic). It is these slightly divergent and corresponding itineraries that I will critically examine, paying attention to the implications of this dissimilarity between them. More specifically, I will explore how, for Blanchot, a paradoxical non-knowledge of (a relation without relation with) being emerges through a passionate attraction to writing, while for Bataille it is rather a desire to embrace life in its totality that drives him towards writing and marks it. For the purpose of my discussion, I will first turn to some of Bataille's influential pre-war essays that led to *L'Expérience intérieure*, the first part of the *Somme Athéologique* trilogy. I will then focus on Bataille's treatise on experience, as it both comes out of and fosters the first encounter – which would become a life-long friendship – the mutual influence and the two-way relationship between Bataille and Blanchot. I will subsequently look at Blanchot's review of the book, pass through 'Comment la littérature est-elle possible?', to conclude by looking at his seminal essay 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort'.

Chapter 1
Bataille: the passion of the real

S'il fallait me donner une place dans l'histoire de la pensée, ce serait je crois pour avoir discerné les effets, dans notre vie humaine, de l' « évanouissement du réel discursif », et pour avoir tiré de la description de ces effets une lumière évanouissante.
(Georges Bataille, 'Post-Scriptum. 1953')

Writing as the pursuit of the outside

Bataille, in the early 1930's, was briefly involved in the editorial board of the surrealist journal *Documents*, to which, covering a wide range of areas, he contributed with a series of articles that bring forth his intellectual obsessions. The review's title, as Denis Hollier mentions, and as Bataille himself suggested, is, in its anti-aesthetic (and anti-literary) connotation, indicative of what Bataille would come to pursue in his writing.[1] Unlike the surrealists, he is not searching for the imaginary, the oneiric, the dreamlike, but, in a documentary-like endeavour, he seeks to embrace human and material life in in its entirety (which for him, does not coincide with reality in its depiction by realist representation). Bataille saw his contribution to *Documents* as an excellent occasion to attack André Breton and the movement's uplifting, idealistic considerations (as indicated by the prefix *sur*).[2] André Masson, recounting his first encounter with Bataille, adds to Bataille's dislike of the surrealists his reproach of their predecessors, namely the Dadaist movement.[3] As Masson recalls, Bataille's charge against Dada is that, despite its attack on conventional art and on rational thought, it shows a considerable lack of foolishness: '« *Dada* ? – pas assez idiot », c'est en ces termes que Georges Bataille conclut notre premier entretien. [...] Oui, *Dada* pas assez idiot, et le surréalisme beaucoup trop « mental »'.[4] In light of this account, the *Documents* endeavour can be seen as a documentation – a record and a demonstration – of the deficiency of the mental targeting of both intellectualism and intelligence.

In 'Le Gros orteil', the parodic praising of the big toe as the most human (and lowly) part of the body, Bataille sketches out the 'retour à la réalité' for which he strives, as directly opposed to poetic haze, which is dismissed as synonymous with idealistic (ethereal) diversion. Echoing in a way Deleuze, for whom to write is neither to draw on reality ('écrire n'est certainement

[1] Denis Hollier, 'La Valeur d'usage de l'impossible' in *Les Dépossédés (Bataille, Caillois, Leiris, Malraux, Sartre)* (Paris: Minuit, 1993), 153.
[2] Michel Surya designates Bataille's contributions in *Documents* as 'une machine de guerre contre le surréalisme'. See, Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille. La mort à l'œuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992, 2012), 143.
[3] In this respect, one might recall that Tristan Tzara famously designates disgust as the beginnings of Dada.
[4] André Masson, 'Le Soc de la charrue' in *Critique,* 195–196 (août-septembre 1963), 701–5 (704–5).

pas imposer une forme (d'expréssion) à une matière vécue') nor to have recourse to the imagination ('écrire n'est pas raconter [...] ses rêves et phantasmes')[5], the Bataillean return to reality is depicted as a spasmodic convulsion: 'jusqu' à en crier, en écarquillant les yeux […] devant un gros orteil'.[6] As Deleuze notes in his essay 'La Littérature et la vie': 'c'est la même chose de pécher par excès de réalité, ou d'imagination', since both belong to the realm of the possible, of artistic/subjective expression.[7] In this respect, Bataille's writing, rejecting both sur-realism (due to its underlying idealism in its pretention to accede to a superior reality), and representational (mimetic, conventional) realism (due to its inability to depict reality in its fullness), can be seen, paraphrasing Deleuze, to be entangled with the excess *in* reality, an excessive reality which persistently remains outside all attempts of seizure.

In an attempt to decipher the ambiguous nature of the entanglement between writing and reality, we might refer to Nancy's term 'ex-scription'. This term, employed with particular reference to the Bataillean act of writing, offers a response to the question of, as Nancy puts it, 'how to accede to this excess'.[8] Ex-scription, merely by its vocable, resonates perfectly with the Bataillean vocabulary, which is, in Denis Hollier's observation, 'une célébration du préfixe *ex*' (as the recurrence of the words 'excess', 'experience', 'expenditure' witnesses).[9] More significantly, the prefix of the term having the meaning 'out, out of, outside' (as opposed to that of in-scription which denotes an enclosure, an inside, a within), gestures towards something outside textual enclosure. Nancy has shown that this conception of writing in terms of an opening and an exposure dis-locates existence (the existence of everything that is in question 'in' the text and that the text writes 'about') outside the text:

> l'écriture excrit le sens, c'est-à-dire qu'elle montre que ce dont il s'agit, *la chose même*, la « vie » de Bataille ou le « cri », et pour finir l'existence de toute chose dont il « est question » dans le texte (y compris [...] l'existence de l'écriture elle-même) est hors du texte, a lieu hors de l'écriture.[10]

[5] Gilles Deleuze, 'La Littérature et la vie' in *Critique et Clinique* (Paris: Minuit, 1993), 11.
[6] Georges Bataille, 'Le Gros orteil' in *Œuvres Complètes I* (hereafter, *OC I*), 204.
[7] Deleuze, 'La Littérature et la vie', 12.
[8] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Multiples Arts. The Muses II*, ed. Simon Sparks (Redwood City: Stanford University Press: 2006), 7.
[9] Denis Hollier, 'De l'équivoque entre littérature et politique' in *Les Dépossédés*, 118. While Hollier makes this remark with regard to Bataille's *erotics,* it can arguably be extended and refer to the whole body of Bataille's work.
[10] Jean Luc Nancy, 'L'excrit', *Une pensée finie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990), 54–65 (61).

The fabrication of writing as ex-scription, or more particularly as an intricate play of inscription and exscription, denotes that writing's access to the real of the world is, far from being a straightforward path, in fact rather difficult; but, as Nancy puts it, 'that difficulty makes access occur'.[11]

Bataille's unconventional understanding of the real and the pressure it exerts on discourse (and subsequently on his own writing) emerges in 'Le Bas matérialisme et la gnose'. In this essay, in which matter takes a central role, Bataille engages in a materialist decomposition of surrealistic elevations and of the Hegelian system. Materialism is defined as: 'avant tout la négation obstinée de l'idéalisme, ce qui revient à dire en dernier lieu de la base même de *toute* philosophie'.[12] In the dualistic nature of Gnosticism, with its duck-headed, monstrous archontes, matter is found 'comme un *leitmotiv* […], comme un principe *actif* ayant son existence éternelle autonome'.[13] Bataille's interest in gnosticism and base materialism lies in the intellectual implications of their postulates, since 'la matière basse est *extérieure* et *étrangère* aux aspirations idéales humaines (my emphasis)'.[14] Revealing what is at stake, Bataille notes:

> Il s'agit avant tout de ne pas se soumettre à quoi que ce soit de plus élevé, qui puisse donner à l'être que je suis, à la raison qui arme cet être, une autorité d'emprunt. Cet être et sa raison ne peuvent se soumettre qu'à ce qui est plus *bas*, à ce qui ne peut servir en aucun cas à singer une autorité quelconque.[15]

It is in this early text that the ideas that will haunt Bataille's thought are introduced: sovereign action (not serving any goal, any value) versus servile attitude (a subjection to ends outside oneself), base matter (low) versus idealized spirit and human aspirations (high). Yet, what is highly original in Bataille's approach is that in his praise of base matter and 'the low' he does not assign them a place alongside, or as substitutes of, old values in an attempt to elevate them.[16] As Denis Hollier observes, Bataille privileges dualism not as a system of thought, but

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[11] Nancy, *Multiples Arts*, 4.
[12] Georges Bataille, 'Le Bas matérialisme et la gnose', in *OC I*, 220. He adds that materialism is also a critique of ontological materialism, 'impliquant que la matière est la chose en soi', 225.
[13] Ibid. 223.
[14] Ibid. 225.
[15] Ibid.
[16] The fact that Bataille does not postulate a simple inversion of the high/low paradigm marks his break with the ethnographers and, to some extent, with Nietzsche. With regard to the ethnographers, Denis Hollier remarks that in their inclusion of the low and the everyday, they looked for continuity and classification, while Bataille wanted rupture and to get things out of order. With regard to Nietzsche, Surya notes that his battle against the world is conducted from the elevated viewpoint of the *Übermensch*, while the Bataillean war is conducted from below. See, Hollier, 'La Valeur d'usage de l'impossible', 169, 172 and Surya, *Georges Bataille. La mort à l'œuvre*, 169.

rather as an 'attitude of thought', since dualism for him is precisely a 'resistance to system and homogeneity'.[17] Put differently, what Bataille emphasizes in the low and the base is precisely their baseness and unworthiness, as disruptive forces which resist, and remain outside of, any attempt at codification, thus destabilising idealized aspirations.

Henceforth Bataille will constantly turn his attention to the low and the filthy. Many of his fictions largely draw on debauchery, as he seeks in it, in Surya's words, 'the uninterpretable truth of existence' ('de l'existence l'ininterprétable verité').[18] Bataille engages with the low and the obscene, joyfully submitting to and writing on it, not in a fetishistic compulsion with the filth per se, but in a total affirmation of life, an unreserved consent, a Nietzschean 'yes' to the world to the point of it upsetting one's stomach (or, as Surya puts it, 'un amour témoigné jusqu'à la honte').[19] Yet, the importance of this early essay lies in that it does not simply unveil the insufficiency of existing, homogenising discourses that repress and disregard matter, turning it into concepts and ideas. By designating the low, the base, precisely as what cannot be incorporated in signifying systems (as it is in-significant, un-worthy), this early essay announces what is at stake for Bataille in writing itself. Bataille does not mean to compensate for the exclusion of base matter by embracing it in his writings. Though the low might become the obsessive theme of his own writing (equally embraced and not disregarded by him), it will still not (and cannot be) captured in his writing (which is precisely what draws him to it). Therefore, writing on the debased, on the vile and dirty, amounts to writing on the impossible. Besides, the ob-scene refers etymologically to what is against – in a discordant relation with – the scene, including the scene of writing. In this regard, this early essay displays how, for Bataille, writing is crucially related to the (its) outside and how his writing will aim at what cannot be grasped, namely the impossible.

Excess as extra-textual

Associating writing with the outside and the impossible, Bataille is attracted to Sade, as his texts give an aberrant access to a heterogeneous world, namely, to what is radically other, excluded and silenced by systems of thought and by the social body. Critical of the surrealists' sublimation (aestheticisation) of Sade's work, which results in the disregard of the odious and excremental forces at play within it, Bataille, in his essay 'La Valeur d'usage de D.A.F de

[17] Denis Hollier, 'The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille' in *Bataille, A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 62.
[18] Surya, *Georges Bataille. La mort à l'œuvre*, 149.
[19] Ibid.

Sade', does not exile the Sadean undertaking in the irreality of fiction ('en dehors et au-dessus de toute réalité'), but extracts the actual implications of the outrageous reality it triggers, both hideous and hidden.[20] Sade's importance for Bataille lies, amongst other reasons, in the fact that he inaugurates writing as a hetero-logous practice, as the speech (the logos) of the wholly other (the heteros). In his definition of *'le corps étranger* (*das ganz Anderes*)' as what society tries to repress under the elaboration of taboos, prohibitions or rituals, Bataille, in a daring equivalence, subsumes what is frequently considered to be excremental (faeces, sperm, menstrual blood), alongside the sacred and the divine.[21] The significance of Bataille's essay on Sade lies in that it does not simply favour, attributing a quasi-ontological priority to, the excessive dimension of human existence, but instead elaborates a complex relation between the primordial excess of human life and all social and rational constructions intrinsically bound up with it (in the sense of both stemming from and striving – in vain – to delimit it). Bringing forth this intricate interrelation, it unveils the insufficiency of all attempts at enclosure (including the attempt at linguistic and textual codification). In this respect, Bataille proclaims the paradox of writing as a heterological project, due to the resistance of heterogeneous elements (sacred or/and excremental), as excessive and immoderate, to any attempt at objectification and definition, as he remarks: 'il faut même ajouter qu'*il n'existe aucun moyen* de placer de tels éléments dans le domaine objectif humain immédiat [...]'.[22] This first encounter with the challenging nature of Sade's venture foreshadows Bataille's ambiguous disposition towards writing. The fact that the Sadean texts call for an alertness to excess, which at the same time cannot be incorporated into any discursive modality (including Sade's – and Bataille's – own texts), triggers and determines Bataille's ongoing perplexed relation to language. In this respect, excess is crucially molded by Bataille as extratextual, as what cannot be successfully attained and sustained by any means, including by means of writing. In an attempt to accede to excess, while Sade's long books, the 'Wagnerian music dramas' of pornographic literature, as Susan Sontag describes them, opt for a repetitive, detailed, linear writing style which, forcing the symbolic order to encompass everything, *ultimately* results in its overburdening and disintegration, Bataille's short compositions of 'chamber music', as Sontag defines them, put forth a writing practice which is more *immediately* (hurriedly)

[20] Georges Bataille, 'La Valeur d'usage de D.A.F de Sade', *OC II*, 56.
[21] Ibid. 58.
[22] Ibid. 63 (my emphasis).

exposed to (that is, contaminated, undone by) excess, in its yearning to enter into an intimacy with it.[23]

Indeed, the uniqueness of Bataille's texts lies in the fact that, despite their extreme, violent, excessive concerns, in their desire to confront the whole of existence, they do not aspire, in a Barthesian-like mode, to correspondingly be excessive, orgasmic, explosive. They claim for themselves, and are confined to, the status of an inadequate residue; they merely are, and present themselves as, residual remainders, leftovers of an uncontained-by-them excess (an excess which is designated by them precisely as extratextual). In an attempt to approach the ambiguity in which the Bataillean texts are caught up, Klossowski employs the contrivance of the 'simulacrum', thereby cutting them off from all claims of truth, originality, authenticity and stressing the element of performativity, simulation and misrepresentation (rather than representation), that prevails in them. The simulacrum, as opposed to notional language that presupposes and subsequently addresses 'closed beings', has the advantage, according to Klossowski, 'de ne pas prétendre fixer ce qu'il présente d'une expérience et ce qu'il en dit', since it portrays, as Ian James points out, 'in its very structure' 'the *movement* of Being, as heterogeneity and expenditure' (my emphasis).[24] The simulacrum brings forth a form of contact inflected with separation, in as much as it presents itself as a *residue* of what it says. To the degree that it 'mimics' the incommunicable, it displays itself as a simulation and an absence rather than as a representation and a presence.[25] In doing so, it reveals, as Klossowski acknowledges, that it will not account for what has happened ('en parler ne rendra compte d'aucune manière de ce qui s'est alors passé').[26] And it is precisely in admitting its betrayal and failure that it is complicit with, and is faithful to, what it recounts, as in the order of simulation (unlike the order of conceptualization) there is no substantive being or originary ground. Briefly, the simulacrum has a logic similar to that of exscription, but, apart from a play of inside / outside, it is further constructed around a tension (thereby, undermining a firm distinction) between originality and simulation. Emanating from such a tension, simulacra, as Deleuze emphasizes, differ radically from 'copies', to the degree that the latter are, in a long

[23] Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination' in *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Penguin, 1966), 60, 62.
[24] Pierre Klossowski, 'Le simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille' in *Critique* 195–196 (août-septembre 1963), 742–51 (743), Ian James, 'From Recuperation to Simulacrum' in *The Beast at Heaven's Gate. Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, ed. Andrew Hussey (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 91–100 (98).
[25] Briefly, the mimetic gesture, which is constitutive of the simulacrum and which sets it apart from notions and concepts, is not to be considered in terms of mimesis, imitation, identification, but rather in terms of non-sameness, of difference, echoing the way in which Benjamin defines the mimetic faculty as becoming or behaving '*like something else'*. 'On the Mimetic Faculty', in *Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1986), 333 (my emphasis).
[26] Klossowski, 'Le simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille', 743.

Platonic tradition, considered as degraded or secondary in their relation to an original. In Deleuze's phrasing: 'les *copies* sont possesseurs en second, prétendants bien fondés, garantis par la ressemblance ; les *simulacres* sont comme les faux prétendants, construits sur une dissimilitude, impliquant une perversion, un détournement essentiels'.[27] Hence, the simulacrum, laying no claims of truth or resemblance, but exposing its dissimilarity (in introducing itself as a relic), becomes a privileged trope in an attempt to address the question of how excess can be accessed.

The Bataillean excess, as depicted above, unseizable (excreted by social life and human thought) and useless (serving no ends, what Bataille would later denominate as sovereign), has the particularity of being conceived in terms of irrecoverable loss and waste. In that sense, it deviates from the common use of the term 'excess' inasmuch as it *is*, is constituted as, unproductive (sovereign) expenditure. These distinguishing features become more obvious in the essay 'La Notion de dépense', where, attacking all representations linked to an impoverished view of existence, Bataille unveils, beside the world of production, necessity and utility (the reproduction and conservation of goods and human life), the world of nonproductive expenditure.[28] Subsuming the realm of luxury, mourning, war, cults, games, perverse sexuality under nonproductive expenditure, he focuses on the dimension of loss as constitutive, as he writes : 'dans chaque cas *l'accent est placé sur la perte* [...] qui doit être la plus grande possible pour que l'activité prenne son véritable sens'.[29] Further, Bataille provides this economy of expenditure with an anthropological basis, drawing on the archaic practice of *potlatch*, as described by Mauss. In this ceremonial feast, American tribes give or destroy an important part of their wealth in order to oblige and humiliate their rivals (who would then have to respond by giving or destroying a greater part of their wealth). What intrigues Bataille in this antagonistic confrontation is that power amounts to the power to lose and wealth is constituted through, and is directed towards, loss. The practice of potlatch might be about wealth and luxury, prestige and hierarchy, and, ultimately, power, but it demands the radical reconfiguration of all of the above, since what confers wealth and respect is the contempt for and disrespect of wealth, as it is loss that counts as gain. In other words, it becomes evident that excess, in Bataille's cosmological vision (as also condensed in his favoured figure of the sun, whose existence *is* – is bound to – an incessant loss of heat and light), does not have the fixed, solid character of the acquired, accumulated surpluses of capitalism, but a rather fluid

[27] Gilles Deleuze, 'Simulacre et philosophie antique', in *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), 295–6.
[28] Georges Bataille, 'La Notion de dépense', *OC I*, 303.
[29] Ibid. 305 (my emphasis).

character which is presented in and as the fleeting movement of extravagant and useless expenditure.

In this respect, the Bataillean reconfiguration of excess in terms of expenditure is still relevant in as much as it challenges not only the workings of early capitalism and its principle of effectiveness and utility but also those of late capitalism and its inclination towards excessive accumulation. Bataille's (anti)economy of boundless wastage is starkly different from the excessive undertakings of capitalism, where huge losses suffered (by some) are exchanged and regained as gross profits (for others). The continuing relevance of Bataille lies in that he conceives the human subject and human life as what eludes and persistently unworks organization and systemic order as well as derides every attempt to encode it. In doing so, he demonstrates – and keeps reminding us – that to celebrate human life as luxurious and prodigal in itself, to consider ourselves as a material and existential exaggeration, superfluous, unseizable, ungraspable and overflowing, bears no resemblance to conceding and glorifying a system, which offers – or rather promises – prodigality (in its diminished and impoverished version of limitless wealth) to the appropriative and greedy grasp of a subject.

Over all forms of writing, Bataille privileges poetry, since he sees it as being animated by the fundamental principle of expenditure that governs human life. Moving away from his earlier dismissal of poetry as synonymous with idealization and refinement, Bataille now renders poetry (and favours it as) a site of expenditure, both symbolic and real, as he notes: 'le terme de poésie […] peut être consideré comme synonyme de dépense: il signifie en effet, de la façon la plus précise, création au moyen de la perte'.[30] Referring in 'La Notion de dépense' to the fate of the *poètes maudits*, Bataille sees poetry as a mode of real expenditure, where the life of the poet is actually spent (sacrificed) and words originate from and cause the poet's own (real) loss, as he writes: 'la dépense poétique cesse d'être symbolique dans ses conséquences'.[31] The poet's life is consumed and ruined, while poetry offers no compensation, since, far from contributing to the poet's glory and immortality, it cuts him off from the world, confining him to misery and sealing him with the destiny of a reprobate. The definition of poetry as primarily a symbolic expenditure, as the words' power to undo themselves (and the fixity of meaning), is given in a brief passage of *Méthode de méditation*, where it is noted: 'elle [la poésie] exprime dans l'ordre des mots les grands gaspillages d'énergie; elle est le pouvoir qu'ont les mots

[30] Ibid. 307.
[31] Ibid.

d'évoquer l'effusion, la dépense immodérée de ses propres forces'.[32] Bataille ascribes a sacrificial structure to poetry, as he sees in it, in Nancy's expression, 'un sacrifice de l'écriture, par l'écriture', due to its acting as an interruption of articulated language, due to the words' capacity to consume their own power by destabilizing their usual (useful) meaning.[33] Poetry, the very form of writing dismissed by Sartre, is, for Bataille, sacrificial (sacrifice being linked, as its etymology suggests, with the sacred), since it is freed from the secular production and closure of meaning. In this sense, Bataille's poetic sacrifice, as radically distinct from meaning-producing, signifying discourses, is not to be strictly confined to the genre of poetry, but rather denotes, in a broader sense, a writing practice that would eventually become his own and that of his epigones. Derrida, in his essay on Bataille, calls for a recasting of the poetic as a process of writing, of Derridean *écriture* (without, however, escaping an oblique allusion to Mallarméan poetry): 'la poétique ou l'extatique est ce qui dans tout discours peut s'ouvrir à la perte absolu de son sens, […] , à la perte de connaissance dont il se réveille par un coup de dés'.[34]

Inner experience: the breakdown of the discursive real

The awakening swooning and the sacrifice of writing by writing, reported by Derrida and Nancy respectively, both take place in the main text of *L'Expérience intérieure*, where a practice of writing as poetic outpouring is launched. In it, Bataille, striving to break with life's consoling illusions (as fabricated by prevalent discourses), puts forth a dis-intoxicated vision of life, access to which is offered through vertiginous moments of intoxication (profound laughter, violent eroticism and poetic sacrifice), where both intentionality and the ability to express (and comprehend) fade out. On that basis, *L'Expérience intérieure* unfolds as a discordant pact between writing and the experience of the outside, inasmuch as it is a written account of something impossible for language to reach and account for. In a celebrated passage of the text, experience is rendered as a desperate yearning for an intimacy with the world, and words are designated both as deficient and as an impediment: 'dans l'expérience, l'enoncé n'est rien, sinon un moyen et même, autant qu'un moyen, un obstacle; ce qui compte n'est plus l'enoncé du vent, c'est le vent'.[35] In that sense, the text of *L'Expérience intérieure* becomes the stage of the encounter, the battle, between what cannot be written of and (its) writing. Pointing

[32] Georges Bataille, 'Méthode de méditation', *OC V*, 220.
[33] Nancy, 'L'excrit', 57.
[34] Jacques Derrida, 'De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale. Un hégélianisme sans réserve' in *L'Arc* 32, 1967, 24–45 (31–2).
[35] Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure, OC V*, 25.

out the tension that marks the text, Julia Kristeva notices: 'il s'agit d'une expérience « non-discursive » mais qui suppose le discours et s'en sert' ; 'et c'est seulement lorque d'autres « opérations » passent à travers le « réel discursif », que celui-ci cesse d'être un réel discursif seulement et témoigne de la réalité hétérogène'.[36] In this respect, the text of *L'Expérience intérieure*, alongside a written record of the experience of the outside, unfolds as a parallel record of the experience of (its) writing, which takes place as a sacrifice of language through language. In it, as language is challenged and relentlessly called into question, due to its deficiency, the text's texture is elusive, fissured, composed of paratactic, frenzied, unfinished sentences. It is through this broken texture that the text points to something outside it, to an excess of signification, which is concurrently exposed but withheld, presented in the text (inscribed), yet uncontained by it (absent, excribed); access to something outside is given, and, at the same time, by the same gesture, taken away, blocked.

Set against the historical background in which it emerged – the German occupation of Paris and the increasing number of executions taking place in the autumn of 1941 – *L'Expérience intérieure* can be read, not as Suleiman suggests, as an '*inward* turn in Bataille's thought' juxtaposed with, and dissociated from, as she seems to imply, the violence of the '*outward* events around him' (my emphasis), but rather as an erratic register of the surrounding turbulence and void, in a world where everything stable is shaken.[37] In this respect, despite its characterization as 'inner', the Bataillean experience is not an esoteric, introspective turn, but a disquieting and opening experience, which implicates an encounter between the self and its outside, as in it the distinction between interiority and exteriority crumbles. Additionally, against all semantic connotations, experience does not lead to knowledge (but to the unknown), neither does it foster subjectivity (but brings about its dissolution. And yet, as the experience is impossible, the subject always returns from – and persists in – its dissolution, in a series of repeated failures, endlessly, until the end). Bataille, nevertheless, employs the term 'inner', willing to challenge the savant's external standpoint of objectivity and detachment, and, correspondingly, the term 'experience' (as synonymous to life, as something *we go through*) willing to further oppose the realm of thought, which firmly *separates* subjects from objects. As he notes, 'elle [l'expérience] apparaît unissant ce que la pensée discursive doit séparer'.[38]

[36] Julia Kristeva, 'Bataille, l'expérience, et la pratique' in *Bataille*, dir. Philippe Sollers (Paris: 10/18, Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973), 267–301 (272).
[37] Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Bataille in the street: the search for virility in the 30's in *Bataille. Writing the sacred,* ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1995), 26–45 (40).
[38] Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure*, 21.

Put differently, the Bataillean experience exceeds the phenomenological tradition from which it derives, since the self, as Martin Crowley elucidates, is not the subject of this excessive and uncontainable experience, but 'its shattered locus'.[39] As Bataille puts it: 'soi-même, ce n'est pas le sujet s'isolant du monde, mais *un lieu de communication*' (my emphasis).[40] Moreover, the Bataillean 'communication' is construed not as a (Hegelian) mutual recognition, neither as a (Habermasian) rational act of exchange between two solid entities, but as a moment of surrendering. Calling for a reconfiguration of the communicative process, Bataille notes: 'il y a *passage, communication* mais non de l'un à l'autre: l'un et l'autre ont perdu l'existence distincte'.[41] For Bataille, communication occurs precisely in and as passing, in gaps and breaches (of the self and of language), in openings and wounds (as hypostasized in Etna's crater, this earthy crack whose ascent plunged him and his lover Laure into an experience of – shared – terror). As becomes evident, Bataillean communication, far from being an interchange in and through language, occurs in and as an excess of the order of signification and meaning that approximates the incommunicable. Its governing logic is close to that of exscription, since it denotes an excess that is not amenable to expression or figuration. In its affective dimension, it is also close to another central figure in Nancy's thought, that of touch, which is conceived not as a confident grasp, but as a contact in (and as) separation. Thus, the poetic becomes a privileged trope of communication, since, in its acting as an interruption (a sacrifice) of articulated language and meaning, it touches upon (opens to) the excess of signification. The poetic, as activated in the very writing of *L'Expérience intérieure*, is signifying discourse (relying upon the discursive), which, exceeding the order of signification (opposing and sacrificing the discursive positions it relies on), shows that sense cannot be summed up in any discursive structure. Put differently, communication for Bataille (defined as poetic sacrifice and brought forth in the structure of *L'Expérience intérieure*) is constructed around a tension between meaning and non-meaning, which is neither an inclination towards the nonsensical (as in this case his communicatory operation – apart from being unreadable – would be irrelevant) nor a transformation of this non-meaning into something meaningful (as the existentialist postulate of the absurd of existence does).[42] Communication accedes, poetically, to (and poetry

[39] Martin Crowley, 'Bataille's Tacky Touch' in *MLN* 119 (2004), 766–80 (771).
[40] Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure*, 21.
[41] Ibid. 74 (my emphasis).
[42] For a critique of existential philosophy on this point, see Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, 172–3.

communicates) 'a dawning of sense', as Nancy puts it, since in its exhaustion, meaning emerges anew, inexhaustible, as the infinity, or the dawning, of sense.[43]

Inner experience, as sketched out above, shares with mysticism the state of rapture and ecstasy, but lacks the reassuring presence of God and redemption that channel mysticism and ultimately guarantee its meaning. Leading towards 'non-savoir' (the unknown), it is meaningless, horror laid bare, which is why Bataille chooses, as a personal object of adoration, the photograph of the torture of a Hundred pieces, an image of irredeemable pain and abandonment, over the image of the crucifixion.[44] Gratefully attributing to Blanchot the much quoted guiding principle of inner experience, Bataille defines experience as an end in itself. Rejecting every attempt to justify experience (being, life) from the outside, and, by the same token, affirming its lack of self-identity, he notes: 'l'expérience elle-même est l'autorité (mais l'autorité s'expie)'.[45] In Hegelian, or anti-Hegelian terms, what Bataille is looking for, when he remarks, 'je vis d'expérience sensible et non d'explication logique', is a lived (un-mediated) experience of radical negativity, impossible to recuperate in a synthetic, positive, comforting result (be it work, knowledge or salvation).[46] The conception of existence in terms of an excessive negativity has already been announced in Bataille's famous letter to Kojève, 'Lettre à X' (1937), in which he asks what becomes of the motor of history (Hegelian negativity), once history arrives at its end: 'la question se pose alors de savoir si la négativité de qui n'a "plus rien à faire" disparaît ou subsiste à l'état de "negativité sans emploi"'.[47] And Bataille goes on defining himself as that 'négativité sans emploi' ('je ne pourrais me définir de façon plus précise').[48] In the light of this letter, *L'Expérience intérieure* can be read as a frenzied response to, an exhaustion and overturning of, the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Where Hegel's '*Bildungsroman*', 'an optimistic narrative of adventure and edification', as Butler eloquently describes it, envisions the outcome of the process (establishing the triumph of the appropriative spirit), Bataille focuses on the non-discursive moments that forerun it (discerning the failure, the impossibility of writing to bring them within reach).[49] Butler's critique of Kojève and Hegel is that in their work subjects are disembodied agents, lacking a 'corporeal life'.[50] Bataille,

[43] Nancy, *Multiple Arts*, 3.
[44] Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure*, 15.
[45] Ibid. 19.
[46] Ibid. 45.
[47] Georges Bataille, 'Lettre à X', *OC V*, 369.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire. Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century* France (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 17.
[50] Ibid. 78.

relentlessly responsive to bodily existence, in his letter to Kojève, utters an objection very similar to Butler's: 'j'imagine que ma vie – la *blessure ouverte* qu'est ma vie – à elle seule constitue la réfutation du *système fermé* de Hegel'.[51] In this respect, '*the existence* of the knower', as Baugh puts it, in a state of open being presents itself as a blind spot to absolute knowledge and resists the Hegelian project of completion (be it of work or of meaning).[52]

The destruction of the structure of being as closed and completed (understood in terms of unity, identity and solidity) is the main task of inner experience. As Bataille proclaims: 'l'expérience est la mise en question (à l'épreuve), dans la fièvre et l'angoisse, de ce qu'un homme sait du fait d'être'.[53] The role of 'anguish' in Bataille is both in alignment and in aberration from Heideggerian thought. Echoing Heidegger, Bataille designates being as open and unknown, as he affirms: 'l'être est insaisissable; il n'est jamais saisi que par erreur'.[54] Being, for Bataille, cannot be located: 'l'être n'est nulle part', as he puts it.[55] It exists only in and as passage, and as such is ungraspable: 'la vie n'est jamais située en un point particulier: elle passe rapidement d'un point à l'autre [...]. Ainsi, où tu voudrais saisir ta substance intemporelle, tu ne rencontres *qu'un glissement* […]'.[56] In this consideration of being in and as slippage and, more crucially, in the laughter that arises from it, Bataille directly inverts Heideggerian ontology (as the latter remains tied up in a tradition that envisions being as presence). Attributing a revelatory force to laughter, Bataille remarks in *L'Expérience intérieure,* 'le rire pressent que […] notre volonté de fixer l'être est maudite'.[57] And as he more clearly states in *Méthode de méditation*, with regard to his attitude towards the slipping away (the absenting) of being: 'je suis parti du rire et non, comme le fait Heidegger, de l'angoisse'.[58] Bringing out the overlooked, yet immensely significant, element of laughter in Bataille's thought, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen underlines its communicative and disruptive force, as it does not arise from a dominant and solid position of the one who laughs, but out of a communicative passion with the 'other' who falls ('other' both

[51] Bataille, 'Lettre à X', 369–70 (my emphasis).
[52] Bruce Baugh, *French Hegel* (London: Routledge, 2003), 84 (my emphasis). It is important to underline that, when endorsing non-knowledge, Bataille does not dismiss but rather *exposes* knowledge, refusing to see existence as reducible to it. As Bataille himself expresses his divergence from Hegel: 'le seul achoppement de cette manière de voir […] est ce qui dans l'homme irréductible au projet: l'existence non-discursive, le rire, l'exstase […]'. Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure*, 96.
[53] Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure*, 16.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid. 98.
[56] Ibid. 111 (my emphasis).
[57] Ibid. 107.
[58] Ibid. 217.

to himself as self-contained and to us).[59] The Bataillean tragic laughter (caused, as Jacobsen clarifies, by a passer-by who, amid a carefully arranged busy daily schedule, slips on a banana peel and abruptly falls, as well as by the tragic downfall of Oedipus) approximates tears, as we laugh *with* the other, at the slippage (the passing) of the world as stable and in our command to its unexpected revelation as unknown and out of reach.[60]

Due to his vision of being as a 'glissement', Bataille directs his attention to what he denominates as 'mots glissants', words that precisely fail to capture what they supposedly denote, appointing as exemplary in this respect two loaded words of the religious and monastic tradition: 'God' and 'silence'. As George Steiner remarks, with regard to silence, the holy man, in his retreat in a cell, withdraws not only from action, but most importantly, from speech, due to a suspicion 'to the *veil of language*' and to a desire 'to break though it to the more real'.[61] In his resorting to the slipping words, bringing about the paradox of their enunciation, Bataille *unveils* the tension (the gap), *within language*, between signifiers and their (non)corresponding signifieds. In the tension that makes them, the slipping words ultimately bring about their explosion and result in their own ruin (sacrifice). As Bataille notes, 'le silence est un mot qui n'est pas un mot', 'il est déjà l'abolition du bruit qu'est le mot ; entre tous les mots c'est [...] le plus poétique : il est lui-même gage de sa mort'.[62] Indeed, not only is silence betrayed by the utterance of the word 'silence', but the word 'silence' is nullified by its reference. Similarly, in the preface of his disturbing narrative, *Madame Edwarda*, which he entitles 'the lubricious key' to *L'Expérience Intérieure,* we read: 'Nous ne pouvons pas ajouter au langage impunément le mot qui dépasse le mots, le mot Dieu; ce mot se dépassant lui-même détruit vertigineusement ses limites'.[63] The explosion of the word 'God' as surpassing itself is brought into play in *Madame Edwarda*, inasmuch as a public whore, Edwarda (impure, terrifying, cadaverous) is appointed as God.

The slipping words, in the tension that constitutes them, or, more precisely, that tears them apart, bring forth paradigmatically the paradoxical status that Bataille attributes to writing and his own ambiguous (tumultuous) relation towards it. This tension within (and with regard to) writing, which animates *L'Expérience intérieure* and many of his other works, has given rise

[59] Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, 'The Laughter of Being', *Bataille: A Critical reader*, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 146–66 (158–59).
[60] Ibid.
[61] George Steiner, *Language and Silence. Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 13.
[62] Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure*, 28, 29.
[63] Georges Bataille, *Madame Edwarda*, *OC III*, 12.

to different and conflicting readings of the Bataillean corpus, which Suleiman classifies under the two opposing categories of the 'textual' and the 'ultrathematic'. As one might expect, Barthes, Sollers and Derrida, who read the Bataillean texts as 'a discursive practice which exceeds the boundaries of meaning, unity, representation', are gathered in the first group.[64] For them, the openness of Bataille's texts towards the body, the obscene, the corporeal, serves as an apt metaphor for the opening and dispersal of the signifying process towards multiplicity, non-meaning, incompleteness. As a result, as Suleiman observes, the textual critics transpose many of Bataille's key concepts (i.e., expenditure, excess, heterogeneity) from the realm of experience to that of writing.[65] Conversely, the second group, within which Suleiman subsumes the feminist readings of Bataille (but we might as well include Bataille's contemporaries and rivals, Breton and Sartre, and, more recently, Zizek), pays no attention to the textual status, the 'framing' as Suleiman puts it, of Bataille's writings and, overemphasizing their content, 'gets to their core'.[66] Zizek's account of the Bataillean endeavour as 'the act of forcing one's way into the raw heart of the Real, of its palpitating flesh' is indicative of such a reading.[67] Ignoring, as Suleiman observes, the fact that what is written is filtered through a specific medium, namely that it is 'a text rather than life itself', the ultrathematic readings reduce Bataille's writings to chronicle of 'male desire' (in the case of Dworkin, or dismiss Bataille as an excremental philosopher or a mystic, in the case of Breton and Sartre, respectively).[68] In brief, what the ultrathematic reading misses is *the fact* that Bataille nevertheless *writes* about experience. By choosing, or rather surrendering, to write, Bataille defies, as Patrick ffrench remarks, an account of him as an 'apologist of unmediated experience', 'at the expense of thought and writing'.[69] On the other hand, the textual reading ignores the haunting dimension of the real (existence) in Bataille's work and of his striving to posit, as Allen Weiss mentions, 'life itself as interpretation'.[70] Yet, while exposing the deficiencies of the prevalent reception of Bataille's work, Suleiman does not step out of them but rather softens the edges of the ultrathematic by offering what she names as her 'thematic' reading. It is Klossowski and Nancy, in their figures of the 'simulacrum' and 'ex-scription', who advance a reading of the Bataillean work, which

[64] Susan Suleiman, 'Transgression and the Avant-Garde' in *On Bataille. Critical Essays*, ed. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 313–34 (317).
[65] Ibid. 318.
[66] Ibid. 322.
[67] Zizek 'Ideology III: To Read Too Many Books is Harmful': http://www.lacan.com/zizchemicalbeats.html.
[68] Suleiman, 'Transgression and the Avant-Garde', 320, 322.
[69] Patrich ffrench, 'Georges Bataille' in *Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought*, ed. Christopher John Murray (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 57.
[70] Alen S. Weiss 'Impossible Sovereignty: Between the Will to Power and the Will to Chance', *October 102* 36, 1986 (Spring), 128–46 (138).

draws precisely on the tensional and *asymmetrical relationship* between his writings and what is written of. The above terms bring into focus, and dwell on, the paradoxical status of Bataille's writings, showing how he works out a language which points towards something uncontained by it, outside it. Nancy's 'exscription' (as indicated by its prefix) and Klossowski's 'simulacrum' (in its self-exposure as a relic) reveal that Bataille, *in* and *when* writing, points towards an existence *outside* his texts rather than merely inscribes (incorporates) it in them. In this way, the above terms show the ambiguity that lies at the heart of the Bataillean act of writing, as it is precisely in pointing towards the excess of what makes it – from which it originates – that writing points simultaneously towards its own exigency, in order to speak – albeit deficiently – of it.

Chapter 2
Blanchot: the passion of literature

[...] [A]ucune situation littéraire n'est définitivement réglée. La littérature est faite de mots, ces mots opèrent une transmutation continuelle du réel en irréel et de l'irréel en réel.
(Maurice Blanchot, 'Les romans de Sartre')

The literary experience: writing outside language

In his review of Bataille's book *L'Expérience intérieure*, also entitled 'L'Expérience intérieure', Blanchot embraces and thoroughly comprehends the Bataillean passion of the negative, writing of the vital necessity to 'aller au délà' and 'dire non à tout'.[71] Similarly, in a much later essay devoted to Bataille under the title 'L'Expérience-limite', included in *L'Entretien infini*, Blanchot, in accordance with Bataille's sketch of experience as a descent into 'non-savoir', construes experience (in its excess, its strange surplus) as a movement towards the inaccessible and the unknown: 'l'expérience-limite est l'expérience de ce qu'il y a hors de tout [...]: l'inaccessible même, l'inconnu même'.[72] In 'L'Expérience intérieure', Blanchot provides a definition of inner experience, close to the one he offered as the main interlocutor in the conversations out of which Bataille's work finally emerged: in its infinite putting into question, inner experience is its own authority, as it has no reference (no meaning, value, justification, end or response) outside itself. In Blanchot's words, 'l'expérience intérieure est *la réponse* qui attend l'homme lorsqu'il a décidé de n'être que question'.[73] Thus we see that Blanchot conceptualizes experience as an exposition of absence. Inner experience, as the experience of the limit, cannot be delimited but rather imposes itself as an exposure to limitlessness. Joining Bataille in his unending questioning, Blanchot, in very Nietzschean terms, adds: 'si [l'homme] s'arrête, c'est dans le malaise du mensonge et pour avoir fait de sa fatigue une vérité'.[74] In accordance with Bataille, Blanchot further mentions that this radical contestation, this restless, never ending negation, this excess that makes every 'arrêt' (stop, ending, conclusion, but also judgement) impossible, as it is not sublimated in a dialectical synthesis (as denoted by Bataille's key notion of 'négativité sans emploi'), is twofold: in its violence it turns against all knowledge but against subjectivity as well, its decisive trait being that the one who experiences it, is no longer there to experience it. For Blanchot, such an experience is an *'hasard'*, in the sense that

[71] Maurice Blanchot, 'L'Expérience intérieure', *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943, 1971), 48–9.
[72] Maurice Blanchot, 'L'Expérience-limite', *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 305. The title of Blanchot's essay 'L'Expérience-limite' denotes more distinctly what is at stake in the Bataillean inner experience which is, after all, an experience of the limit, that is, of limitlessness.
[73] Blanchot, 'L'Expérience intérieure', 47 (my emphasis).
[74] Ibid. 48.

it cannot be mastered or willingly attained.[75] Such an experience, not experienced, is the paradox of non-experience.[76]

Blanchot's dense, six-page article 'L'Expérience intérieure' is a posed, serene epitome of Bataille's long, disordered book of the same title. In that sense, despite its consonance with Bataille's major preoccupations, as briefly sketched out above, it displays how Blanchot is, in Bident's description, 'la passivité de Bataille (sa part d'apaisement, de retrait, de réserve)' and Bataille 'la passion de Blanchot (sa violence intérieure, son désordre mental)'.[77] As already mentioned, it was Blanchot who gave to inner experience its essential attribute (of an authority, which nevertheless expiates itself) and as Bataille recounts, comparing himself again to a wound (long in closing), this answer calmed him: 'Dès le moment cette réponse m'apaisa, me laissant à peine (comme la cicatrice longue à se fermer d'une blessure) un résidu d'angoisse'.[78] Yet, what I am trying to suggest, juxtaposing Blanchot's 'L'Expérience intérieure' to that of Bataille, is not two different idiosyncrasies or two writing styles, each idiosyncratic in its own way, but two different ways of engaging with language in its relation to what both Blanchot and Bataille denote as inner experience. More specifically, Blanchot shares with Bataille the concern (and imperative) to reconfigure the question of being and existence and think them anew in terms of absence, inappropriable excess, constant ungrounding and not in terms of presence, fixed essence, solidity, ground. Nevertheless, their different writing styles (the one serene and calming, the other disordered and violent), invite comparison in as much as in them two different attitudes towards language and writing emerge. The different textual character, the form and syntax of the texts (crafted and orderly, in the case of Blanchot, unfinished and broken, intense and paroxysmal, in the case of Bataille), calls for our attention, in as much as *what* is said (around the theme of inner experience) is bound to the *way* in which it is said (which is the way language relates to inner experience).[79] In other words, what I am alluding to is that Blanchot acclaims more readily language as an accommodating space for the abysmal experience of limitlessness. In this regard, Blanchot's article 'L'Expérience intérieure', while recognizing that, in its extremity, experience involves a passage from the discursive to another

[75] Ibid. 58.
[76] In *L'Entretien infini*, Blanchot uses the paradoxical yet illuminating formula of the experience of non-experience ('expérience de la non-expérience'), 311.
[77] Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot. Partenaire Invisible. Essai Biographique* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1998), 168.
[78] Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure*, 19.
[79] In doing so, both Bataille's and Blanchot's theoretical texts on inner experience, though they are – typically – critical essays, testify to their entanglement with, and their partaking in, the literary.

plane (where 'l'action, le discours, les formes intelligibles et exprimables de la vie n'ont plus leur place'), it nonetheless affirms, towards its end, that discourse bears, and bears witness to, responds, and takes responsibility for, the non-discursive: 'Cependant, il n'est pas interdit au discours d'essayer de *prendre à son compte* ce qui échappe au discours; cela est même necessaire […] '.[80] In this respect, Blanchot in his review, when he appoints Bataille's book as 'an authentic translation' of the experience around which it revolves, speaks less of Bataille's venture and more of his own confident alliance to literature.[81]

As a step towards emphasizing Blanchot's trustful bond with literature, one should stress that he confers on writing the demands of inner experience, as for him it is precisely *in* and *as* writing that an experience of the impossible and the incommunicable, of the other as the other, emerges. Indeed, while in Bataille's *L'Expérience intérieure,* writing, or at least a certain practice of writing, is placed alongside other privileged moments (i.e, violent eroticism, bursting laughter), and in that degree his book testifies to his struggling relation with language, Blanchot insistently posits the question of language as unreservedly essential, not as an obstacle, but as a point of departure. In this regard, Nancy's term exscription that captured Bataille's writing so well, fails to account for the vigilance that Blanchot bestows upon writing (in its relation to the outside). Slightly displacing the Bataillean alertness to life and existence with an impassioned attraction to language and literature, Blanchot gives prominence to what Christopher Fynsk calls the fundamental, albeit eluding, *fact* 'that there is language'.[82] In doing so, he renders writing the inner experience *par excellence* and portrays the mode of being of literary words in terms of the 'négativité sans emploi', under which Bataille defined the lavishness and the vulnerability of his own (and, subsequently, of the human) condition. In this respect, if Blanchot's unsurpassed contribution consists of driving us constantly back, as Fynsk points out, 'to the "fact" of language', Bataille's determinative influence (an influence that both Leslie Hill and Bident, two ardent, deeply attached, readers of Blanchot, acknowledge), lies in Blanchot's conception of writing in terms of a radical contestation.[83] It is throughout his conversations with Bataille that Blanchot moves, as Christophe Bident cites, 'from a classical conception of literature as *revelation* to a modern conception of writing as *contestation*'.[84] In this contestation,

[80] Blanchot, 'L'Expérience intérieure', 52 (my emphasis).
[81] Ibid.
[82] Christopher Fynsk, *Language and Relation … that there is language* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1.
[83] Ibid. 7.
[84] Christophe Bident, 'The Movements of the Neuter' in *After Blanchot: Literature, Criticism, Philosophy*, eds. Leslie Hill, Brian Nelson, Dimitris Vardoulakis (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2006), 26.

writing turns, firstly, against itself, and, subsequently, against the world – or, from a more holistic viewpoint, it attacks the world, both in its materiality and as a word-clogged reality.

The negative force of literature

Blanchot unravels writing in terms of the contestatory force of inner experience, that is, as language turning upon and devoted to itself, in order to question the conditions of its own possibility, in an early essay (which precedes Blanchot's review 'L'Expérience Intérieure' but overlaps with and bears the mark of his conversations with Bataille), with the telling title, 'Comment la littérature est-elle possible ?'. In it, literature is no longer considered as a *site* of human and spiritual values, but as a *space* withdrawn from the social (actual) world, or rather, as a *spacing,* in which language reflects and relates to itself. Put differently, Blanchot here sets up his view of literature, not in the Sartrean sense of a useful project, which *serves* concrete values, including revolutionary goals, but, posits *itself as* a violent, inherently negating (revolutionary) force. In this essay, an oblique critique of Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, Blanchot, examining a literary attitude that he, like Paulhan, calls 'Terror', equates all literature, at least its very soul, with Terror.[85] For Blanchot, authentic literature is synonymous with Terror in that it consists of a contestation of both language and pre-existing works of literature, rhetorical commonplaces, linguistic clichés and established literary conventions. Yet, in this contestatory undertaking, the question that inevitably arises, and that Blanchot raises, is:

> Comment dans ces conditions la littérature peut-elle exister? Comment l'écrivain, qui se distingue des autres hommes par ce seul fait qu'il conteste la validité du langage, et dont le travail devrait être d'empêcher la formation d'une œuvre écrite, finit-il par créer quelque ouvrage littéraire ? [86]

For Blanchot, literature, in its mistrust of worn out words, in its dismissal of previous literary texts, ultimately realises that in them precisely lie the conditions of its own possibility, to them it owes its existence. Hence, one fights language with the weapons language has provided one with and a work cannot claim to be original but by exposing its fundamental unoriginality,

[85] The essay also exposes Blanchot's idiosyncratic literary practice, which Christophe Bident describes as an appropriation and expansion of the original text that finally opens it to a questioning and a consummation of itself. In that respect, Paulhan himself says of Blanchot's article 'il me passionne, il les [Les Fleurs] comprend bien mieux que moi, vraiment il me les révèle'. Bident, *Maurice Blanchot*, 15.
[86] Maurice Blanchot, 'Comment la littérature est-elle possible ?', *Faux pas*, 97.

hence, itself as an impostor. In other words, literature for Blanchot becomes possible insofar as it is, and faces itself as, impossible.

This constitutional impossibility that makes literature possible is expanded in Blanchot's essay 'Kafka et la littérature', where the impossibility of writing is pronounced in its relation, not only with the always already eroded words, but also, with the reality it supposedly expresses. Speaking of literature's strange and scandalous possibility, Blanchot unveils the hiatus which constitutes and enacts writing. As he observes :

> Je suis malheureux, je m'assieds à ma table et j'écris : « Je suis malheureux. » Comment est-ce possible ? [...] Mon état de malheur signifie épuisement de mes forces ; l'expression de mon malheur, surcroît de forces. Du côté de la douleur, il y a impossibilité de tout, vivre, être, penser ; du côté de l'écriture, possibilité de tout, mots harmonieux, développements justes, images heureuses.[87]

And he goes on, adding: 'C'est comme si la possibilité que représente mon écriture avait pour essence de *porter sa propre impossibilité* – l'impossibilité d'écrire qu'est ma douleur [...] (my emphasis)'.[88] Leslie Hill deciphers the impossibility of literature as an aporetic moment, where the term aporia is to be understood in its double sense (both as a puzzlement, a doubting and as a destitution, a lack of resources). As Hill argues, 'literature's essence does not lie in the foundational purity of the work but rather *in the aporia* that turns the act of its foundational purity into the impossibility of a possibility'.[89]

Blanchot's conception of literature in terms of a foundational impossibility, in the sense that, in its aporia, it founds nothing and rests on nothing, is historically determined and significant. In the book *Les Dépossédés*, a naming which, in an analogous way to Gertrude Stein's 'Lost Generation', includes a whole generation of post-war writers, Denis Hollier, in the introductory chapter, entitled 'La littérature *doit*-elle être possible' (my emphasis), focuses on the historical context out of which the destitution of literature emerges. Hollier refers to the opening of *La douleur,* where Duras, sketching herself as seated at a table, during the Liberation of Paris, interviewing refugees and taking notes, recounts the moment when an officer told her: 'On vous permet de travailler debout, mais je ne veux *plus* voir cette table ici' (my emphasis).[90] As Hollier

[87] Maurice Blanchot, 'Kafka et la littérature', *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 27.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Leslie Hill, *Blanchot, Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), 74 (my emphasis).
[90] Hollier, 'La Littérature doit-elle être possible ?' in *Les Dépossédés*, 10.

emphasizes, attributing an allegorical value to the scene, the writer has nothing to cling on to any longer. In that sense, Blanchot complies with and fosters, throughout the French post-war years, a view of literature which chooses as its theme and recounts the impossibility of its proper writing, in this way carrying within it the Adornean aesthetic (and ethical) imperative imposed by the Holocaust.[91] Blanchot discerns the ethical implications of writing, depicting it, in its self-reflection, as an attempt to formulate a just relation to the world, when he notes :

> Écrire comme question d'écrire, question qui porte l'écriture qui porte la question, ne te permet plus ce rapport à l'être – entendu d'abord comme tradition, ordre, certitude, vérité, toute forme d'enracinement – que tu as reçu un jour du passé du monde.[92]

This slightly autobiographical phrase, to the extent that it bears both the trace of his pre-war attachment to rootedness (nationhood) and his subsequent turning away from it, crystallises and illuminates, in a quite straightforward way, that for Blanchot it is through writing that a renewed way of thinking 'being' emerges. In this respect, Leslie Hill connects Blanchot's pre-war attachment to homogeneity, nation, tradition, to his subsequent devotion to (re)thinking the question of 'being' and existence in terms of an ontological groundlessness, exteriority and alterity, outside of topologies of sameness, identity or substance. In other words, Blanchot, throughout his post-war works, strongly attests that 'being' can never be gathered, reducible within an order, be it philosophical or political.

The ontological peculiarity of literature[93]

The ontological peculiarity with which Blanchot endows literature finds its more striking account in his essay 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort'. In this major essay, literature is outlined, not as a form or a genre, but, as a mode of being in quasi-ontological terms. More importantly, in the Heideggerian resonance that marks the essay, the mode of being of the literary offers a way to revitalize and rethink the question of being (beings). It is this essay that first puts forward the fundamental intricacy, constantly highlighted in many of Blanchot's

[91] Christophe Bident suggests such a reading. See Bident, *Maurice Blanchot*, 285.
[92] Maurice Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 8–9. Hill, *Blanchot. Extreme Contemporary*, 43–4.
[93] It is Gerard L. Bruns that employs the term 'ontological peculiarity' for Blanchot's conception of the artwork to indicate how writing for Blanchot is bound with impossibility and is thereby incompatible with being in the world. See, Gerard L. Bruns, 'Writing, Friendship, and the Ontology of the Work of Art', in *Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot. The Power of Contestation*, eds. Kevin Kart and Geoffrey H. Hartman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 122.

works, between literature and being (both in the sense of literature as a peculiar mode of being and in the sense of its relation with beings). Blanchot himself articulates the question: 'Qu'est-ce qui est en jeu par ce fait que quelque chose comme l'art ou la littérature existerait?'.[94] It therefore becomes explicit that literature's self-referentiality, the infinite questioning of its essence and its origin, does not result in and is not driven by a narcissistic, hermetic debate on artistic creativity and inspiration (despite the fact that Blanchot was at first, and is still, read by those themselves exposed to and dealing with the process of creation). Blanchot postulates the question of literature as essential and contemplates upon it in a highly original (*insoupçonné*, in Foucault's expression) way, both drawing on and moving away from Heidegger, since its existence as such poses a question to being.[95] In this respect, the 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort' essay, which Leslie Hill characterises as the 'most programmatic philosophical account of literature', starkly shows that for Blanchot, in contrast to Bataille, who provocatively pronounces himself to be an anti-philosopher, literature cannot do without philosophy.[96] However, conversely, as this essay will reveal, literary writing opposes, exceeds and in a way supersedes philosophical thought.

At the beginning of the essay, Blanchot notes: 'admettons que la littérature commence au moment où la littérature devient une question'.[97] Yet, as he immediately adds, this question is not to be reduced, as we might be tempted to think, to the writer's doubts; it is a more fundamental question, a question that lies silent within the work. Subsequently, the analogy of literature and Terror reappears, acquiring, as the essay's title indicates, a more radical, a more violent sense. The negative force of literature is pushed to its limits, as here literary Terror does not merely turn against literary conventions but tends towards a worldly life, in a desire to negate 'quelque chose de réel, de plus réel que les mots'.[98] Using Hegel against Sartre, Blanchot attacks the statement that literature should be considered as, and identified with, action in the world, as developed in Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*. According to Blanchot, literary activity differs radically from worldly action, to the extent that literature negates the totality of the world. For Blanchot, the *specificity* of writing lies in its absolute negation of the world; therefore, of all worldly action, literature can only be analogous to revolutionary action, in

[94] Maurice Blanchot, 'Avant-Propos', *L'Entretien infini*, vi.
[95] Michel Foucault, 'Sur les façons d'écrire l'histoire' (entretien avec R. Bellour), as quoted by Bident, *Maurice Blanchot. Partenaire Invisible*, 458.
[96] Hill, *Blanchot. Extreme Contemporary*, 103.
[97] Maurice Blanchot, 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', *La Part du feu*, 293. The essay was initially published as two parts in Bataille's review, *Critique*.
[98] Blanchot, 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', 308.

which everything pre-existing (God, other people, the state, laws) is totally negated.[99] As Critchley points out, literature's right to death consists in 'its absolute freedom, its right to the total negation of reality, as realised *in* and *as* language'.[100] Blanchot here sees in a writer's activity the highest form of radical negation and, hence, Sade, who partakes of the fate of the revolutionary, as the writer *par excellence*.

Yet, the Hegelian conception of language as murder, since language deprives things of their being ('quand je parle, la mort parle en moi'), takes an interesting twist in Blanchot, as for him language, indeed, kills, but also appears as a bearer of death.[101] Taking as his starting point Hegel's position that in the word 'cat', the cat loses its singular reality and becomes an idea in which the real cat is absent, Blanchot, replacing the 'cat' with a 'woman', emphasizes that the ideal negation performed in language (the ease with which we say a woman, detaching her from her existing reality) would not be possible 'si cette femme n'était pas réellement capable de mourir'.[102] By indicating that language, in retaining nothing but an absence, is a constant allusion to real death, Blanchot makes what Christopher Fynsk calls an 'ontological claim about language'.[103] And as Blanchot underlines, it is, in particular, literary language, that designates (and makes us encounter), the void, 'ce vide qu'il ne peut pas ni combler ni représenter', whereas common language, looking for peace, accepts that the reality of the existent comes to life fully and certainly in the form of its idea.[104] As Timothy Clark points out, for Blanchot the language of literature is constituted not in the context of familiarity of everyday life but in a context of ignorance. This context of ignorance which constitutes the world of a novel echoes Bataille's notion of non-knowledge (as it appears in *L'Expérience intérieure*). Clark further argues that in a literary world words are not *signs,* are not 'about' something, 'disappearing before what they represent', but, taking place in a vacuum (which is the novel), simply 'are'. In this respect, literary words are not *useful* means of communication but exist in the way of, what Bataille nominated as, an *unemployed* (useless) negativity.[105]

[99] Ibid.
[100] Critchley*, Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, 63 (my emphasis).
[101] Blanchot, 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', 313.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Christopher Fynsk, 'Crossing the Threshold. On "Literature and the Right to Death"', in *Language and Relation … that there is language*, 230.
[104] Blanchot, 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', 15.
[105] Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot. Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 75–6.

Yet while placing the Bataillean experience of non-knowledge (the void) in the world of literature, Blanchot does not disregard the bodily dimension of this experience, as expressed in the Bataillean moments of laughter, tears and the erotic. For Blanchot, literary language, in its questioning of itself, searches for that moment of existence, of being, prior to its negation by language; it seeks to recover the pre-linguistic materiality of things. As Blanchot writes:

> Dans la parole meurt ce qui donne vie à la parole. [...] Admirable puissance. Mais quelque chose était là, qui n'y est plus. Quelque chose a disparu. Comment le retrouver, comment me retourner vers ce qui était avant, si tout mon pouvoir consiste à en faire ce qui est après ? Le langage de la littérature est la recherche de ce moment qui la précède.[106]

In its endeavour to reach the lost materiality of things, literature is assisted by the materiality of language, as manifested paradigmatically in poetry. Words, instead of being an obstacle, are now a precious ally. Here, the influence of Heidegger and of what he considers the 'thingly' character of a poem (the physicality of rhythm, shape) is manifest. Unlike Bataille, Blanchot does not consider poetry in terms of a writing practice of outpouring (which operates beyond, and thereby contests, the order of signified and meaning), but as a condensed materiality which partakes, by analogy, in the materiality of the world.

Having divided literature into two slopes, the Sadean total negation of things and the poetic salvation of things, Blanchot faces the impossibility of both and the inevitable passing from one slope to the other. Literature, in its infinite power to negate immediately everything, in its global negation, negates nothing in the end. Writing, outstepping the Hegelian dialectics, has the peculiar status of being, in Leslie Hill's formulation, 'an absolute negation and affirmation'.[107] In that respect, the case of Sade, who spent his whole life as a writer isolated in his cell, is exemplary. Similarly, the second slope described above, in its concern for the reality of things, also inevitably fails, since, in Critchley's depiction, it has 'the Midas touch' and conceals (with words) that which was meant to be revealed (being).[108] It is in this intermediary space, never coinciding with either of its two slopes, constantly divided and suspended between them, between negation and what cannot be negated, between revelation and what precisely resists being revealed, that Blanchot locates the fate and struggle of literature. Yet, despite – or

[106] Blanchot, 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', 316.
[107] Hill, *Blanchot. Extreme Contemporary*, 107.
[108] Critchley, *Very Little … Almost Nothing*, 71.

precisely because of – the Heideggerian resonance of such a struggle (as explored in 'The origin of the work of art', in which the artwork is defined in terms of a strife between the world, that reveals itself, and the earth, that hides), one should note that for Blanchot, literature provides no Heideggerian disclosure of truth. Rather, he depicts it as a space that leads, as Levinas writes, 'pas à la vérité de l'être [mais] à l'erreur de l'être – à l'être comme lieu de l'errance'.[109] This conception of being as place of wandering (errance), is close to the Deleuzian motif of 'becoming' and to the Nietzschean view of existence in terms of an eternal return, namely, of existence alone in its nakedness (without ground, aim or meaning), recurring infinitely. In this way, in opposition to Heidegger's view of poetry as a foundation (a revelation) of truth and his final depiction of the artwork's origin in terms of an *enracinement*, Blanchot (committed in his radical conception of literature as unfoundational and impossible, as already asserted in his earlier essays), describes this origin in terms of a never reached (and appropriated) longing:[110] 'Mais, au départ, que s'est-il perdu ? Le tourment du langage est ce qu'il manque par la nécessité où il est d'en être le manque. Il ne peut même pas le nommer'.[111] Yet, ultimately Blanchot finds a name for it in the paradoxical status of the Levinasian 'il y a', a name which nevertheless defies language, as it presents itself as the unfathomable pre-conceptual materiality literature longs for (but cannot reach). While the reference to the 'il y a' is brief and marginal in the 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort' essay, in its status as always already there, it signposts all of Blanchot's subsequent attempts not to sidestep the question of origin but to think of it otherwise, untying it from any foundational logic as well as from a melancholic resurrection of it in terms of loss. In parallel, it signposts Blanchot's subsequent attempts to think 'being' 'otherwise than being', in excess of ontological possibility.

Levinas describes the 'il y a' in terms of an otherwordly absence which, in the disappearance of everything, would be experienced as a sort of presence. This 'otherworldliness', which cannot be qualified in terms of transcendence or immanence, as it exceeds this dichotomy and opposition, is depicted by Levinas as a rumbling silence, 'un silence bruissant' ('quelque chose qui ressemble à ce que l'on entend quand on approche un coquillage vide de l'oreille, comme si le vide était plein, comme si le silence était un bruit').[112] The attempt of literary language to

[109] Emmanuel Levinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot* (Montpellier : Fata Morgana, 1975), 19.
[110] Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, transl. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 75.
[111] Blanchot, 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', 316.
[112] Emmanuel Levinas, *Éthique et infini* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), 38. The first reference to the 'il y a' as the density of the void, the presence of absence with explicit reference to Maurice Blanchot's novel *Thomas l'obscur* appears in Levinas' work *De l'existence à existant* in 1947.

address the preconceptual singularity of things, things in their singular existence, as explored above, touches on the broader question of how thought approaches (and relates to) what is beyond and outside thought. In this respect, the 'il y a', posited as logically prior, as what is outside – before and after – every worldly formation, is a passive (yet persistent and fundamental) resistance to every attempt of construction or destruction; it is, one might say, an irreducible remnant that ruins every possibility of ruination or of construction.

To frame the above in/against the lexicon of contemporary debates of object-oriented ontology, the 'il y a' in its outsideness, designates the anonymous, impersonal murmur of being in excess of phenomenal thingness rather than a realm of things as such. Whereas object-oriented philosophy, in its emphasis on the existence of objects as independent and in its rejection of the privileging of human existence, attempts to posit the world of objects as autonomous – *as equally autonomous to* the human world, the 'il y a' is rather the constant *objection to* every attempt to construct a world in terms of autonomy and stability. While object-oriented philosophy, in its defence of the autonomy of objects, refuses absolutely their reduction to any relation (be it with humans or with other objects), as it considers every relation distortive for the related object, the Blanchotian 'il y a' (as the unity of being) calls for an absolute relation of extreme affirmation. In this respect, as will be made clear in our next chapter on Blanchot, the significance of the 'il y a' lies, neither in that it substantiates nor in that it provides a name for preconceptual absolute singularity (or difference as such), but in that it calls for an entirely different way of relationality.

Object-oriented ontology, asserting the primacy of ontology, to which its name testifies, renders objects its focal point, against the Heideggerian idea of a pre-eminently human way of being and being-in-the world. Overthrowing the Kantian transcendent subject as the ground of and as that which constitutes objective reality, it disengages and liberates objects from human perception and posits them as autonomous substances. The anti-Kantian endeavour of object-oriented ontology can be described in Kantian terms as follows: objects are dissociated from human cognition and perception (cease to be phenomena) and are reconsidered as autonomous (become noumena that exist independently). Against this context, the contrivance of the 'il y a', rather than introducing a world of objects (in its independence and solidity), indicates the dizzying absence of any world whatsoever, as in Blanchot's thought there is no room for anything of substance and all there is *is* an experience of voiding and emptiness. In other words, the 'il y a', rather than complementing and radicalizing ontology by institutionalizing another

ontological state (that of objects and substance), points to a state prior to – and more 'primal' than – ontology (that of non-being).

In his recourse to, and in his *naming* of, the 'il y a', which is 'neither nothingness, nor being' (and whose status is close to the Bataillean negativity without employ, an indestructible negativity which pre-exists and would still remain at the end, when all the doing is done), Blanchot, in his trustful bond with literature, sees, unlike Bataille, language as opening a space and providing a distinct name (a pre- or a pseudo-concept, in Leslie Hill's expression) for precisely what cannot be said in language.[113] In that respect, Blanchot renders mythical Orpheus the emblematic figure of the writer and his experience (in its longing for the inaccessible, his gaze at what resists being looked at, Eurydice in the underworld, and her instant disappearance) as the experience, the fate and torture of writing, its double bind. For Blanchot, what literature can (and cannot) attain is crystallised in Orpheus' gaze, in Eurydice's image: a presence not sustained but given in its withdrawal.

The above features of the 'gaze' and the 'image', which acquire a central place in Blanchot's *L'Espace littéraire,* can be understood by Nancy's untying of the term 'regard'. Though the term is not directly applied by Nancy with reference to Blanchot (but with reference to Kiarostami, a director whose ethics of discretion to the infinite alterity of existence can be compared to that of Blanchot), it elucidates (especially in its juxtaposition to exscription) the relation of Blanchot's writing to the real. As Nancy notes, by again directing his attention to the prefix of the term, the re-gard is an intensification of vigilance, of care (garde).[114] As he further emphasises, the regard is also an 'égard', a respect, a considerate (not penetrating or appropriating) and attentive observation. In this respect, writing, for Blanchot, as a regard, is a taking care, and a respect, of existence in its alterity. As becomes evident, the virility of the gaze and the appropriative force usually attributed to the act of seeing are undermined, in as much as for Blanchot to look, to write is to be exposed to a sense that is outside one's reach. This outside is the 'il y a' (there is), by which Blanchot designates 'being' as a preconceptual singularity and anonymity, which exists (is there) before the coming of words and concepts (as well as before the phenomenalisation of being as beings or things) and still remains (persists) as the presence of the absence of being, as the inescapability and indestructability of being after the coming of language (as well as after the world of beings and things). This exposure to

[113] Hill, *Blanchot. Extreme Contemporary*, 110.
[114] Jean-Luc Nancy and Abbas Kiarostami, *L'Évidence du Film* (Brussels: Yves Gaevert, 2001), 39.

existence as the 'il y a' (that can be thought, in its preconceptual materiality, as an indivisible – or radical – immanence, prior to the phenomenological division of the terms immanence and transcendence) happens in and as literature, since philosophy cannot account for it. In this respect, while Bataille's writing might be seen as an attempt to silence the oppressive power of discourse, Blanchot's attempt might be seen as offering a voice to silence in writing.[115]

Bataille, more irreparably (irredeemably) marked by the Hegelian desire to be everything, say everything and keener on excess than Blanchot, adopts Hegel's all-encompassing strategy and excessively accumulates (puts everything in) language making it finally crash down. Blanchot's endeavour, on the contrary, can be thought of as the flipside to the Hegelian strategy of negation, as language (after negating worldly objects) turns against itself (against itself as the negation of objects). Whereas in Bataille language becomes the tool through which language is broken apart, as, in its attempt to say everything, it finally becomes used up and consumed, language in Blanchot, proceeding through the logic of negation where language negates itself, shows that which lies beyond ('beyond' here understood as the antecedence or precedence of a singularity of existing prior to being, world, thought, manifestation). One might say that the inadequacy of language is better expressed by Bataille, while the unsayable is better expressed by Blanchot.

Yet, what is urgent in our inquiry of both is how the non-identical can be secured without adopting (or reintroducing) a transcendent position and without substantiating difference as such (difference in itself). To put it another way, it is crucial *not* to consider the Bataillean moments, of laughter or ec-stasy as moments of 'being' and the Blanchotian 'il y a' in terms of incarnation of radical alterity as such. The next chapter, through a critical analysis of Blanchot's conception of the image (as the absenting of presence) and of Bataille's conception of the instant (as the absenting of the present), focuses on how presence is tied up with absence and the present with retreat and disappearance. Additionally, it shows, via Blanchot and Bataille, how the usual pairing of transcendence with the beyond (what is out of reach, above the ordinary and the contingent) and of immanence with presence (what is here, now) is reworked.

[115] In the final lines of 'Méthode de méditation', Bataille writes: 'des mots ! qui sans répit m'épuisent : j'irais toutefois au bout de la possibilité misérable des mots. J'en veux trouver qui réintroduisent – en un point – le souverain silence qu'interrompt le langage articulé'. Bataille, 'Méthode de méditation', 210.

Chapter 3
The value of annexes: *coïncidences et correspondences*

This concluding chapter critically examines Bataille and Blanchot's singular attitudes towards annexes. Annexes raise the question of form – a question that has been in the background and to some extent touched upon in our previous discussion on Bataille and Blanchot, as from the 1930's onward and throughout the 1940's one can trace a metamorphosis of form in their writings (both fictional and critical). Bataille moves away from his short and bold pre-war essays, passes through the hybrid form of *Somme athéologique*, and ends up opting for more rigorous and systematic forms in his post-war writings, as we will see in the chapters that follow. In parallel, in Blanchot's case, there is a shift from short *compte rendus* of literary texts to extended literary-philosophical essays and from novels to *récits*.

Annexes, as additional, secondary parts, relate to form. They raise the question of what is counted (or miscounted) as essential and what is added as extra (as well as whether this addition is to be taken as an extension or as a subordinate). Thus, at the heart of the issue of the annex are questions of appropriation, incorporation, continuity, discontinuity and wholeness. Annexes question what belongs or does not belong to a whole, as well as whether there is a whole. As Bataille and Blanchot's stances on annexing relates to and brings forth the issue of autobiographical writing, these liminal additions, as handled by Bataille and Blanchot, call into question the relation between literature and life. In this regard, the term 'real' in this section is used in its more specific and conventional meaning of real events that have occurred.

The question – and questioning of – appendices shows how writing, for both Bataille and Blanchot, is neither privileged as that which gives form and coherence to life nor undermined as that which is overthrown by life's vital force. In this respect, appendices illuminate how the relation between life and literature (and, more broadly, the relation between the real and the aesthetic), is reworked by Bataille and Blanchot in terms of a double dissymmetry, as neither pole is privileged at the expense of the other. Writing and life neither oppose one another (according to the formula: writing, *unlike* life, is X), nor are equivalent to each other (according to the formula: writing, *like* life, is X), but endlessly confront each other – without entering into a harmonious composition or merely rejoicing in an internal coherence.

In their respective biographies of Bataille and Blanchot, Surya and Bident emphasize how Bataille's and Blanchot's work (both fictional and theoretical) resists and, concurrently, calls for a biographical reading, thereby establishing an asymptotic, incommensurable relation

between life (their life) and literature (their works). As Surya notes with reference to Bataille's stories, though they evidently bear the mark of his disturbed life, they are largely fictitious, as their material, while heavily drawn from (and drawing on) his life, goes through a work of decentering and metamorphosis ('un savant travail de décentrement et de metamorphose').[116] Therefore, though there are recognisable traces of Bataille's life and obsessions in his fictions, there is no exact, measurable correspondence between the two.[117] Yet, Surya, identifying Bataille as 'un-literary' and 'un-abstract', insists on the capital significance of a biographical approach in order to understand his work (both fictional and critical), as 'il [Bataille] n'a jamais rien pensé qu'il ne voulût vivre, et rien imaginé dont il ne voulût, sur lui-même, seul, ou avec quelques autres, faire l'expérience'.[118]

In a reverse movement, Blanchot's fragmentary narratives include scarce, barely noticeable, autobiographical elements, while large periods of his life, as it was lived in isolation, remain unknown. In his *récits*, it is often uncertain who is speaking, as language is not distinctly enunciated by and attributed to a specific subject. And yet, one might argue that the impersonal tone of Blanchot's narratives bears exactly the mark of, and testifies to, his own immersion in literature (as Blanchot renders writing synonymous to the effacement of the writer and recasts literature as the passage from the author-itative 'I' to the 's/he' – what he calls *le neutre*).

On the contrary, biographical questions are at the centre of Blanchot's critical work, as his literary essays extensively engage, in a conversational, intimate tone, with the experience of other writers. As Bident mentions, with reference to Blanchot's approach to Maupassant: 'de Maupassant, il interroge moins son art que sa folie'.[119] And as he adds, 'Cette tendance marquera toute son œuvre critique. Blanchot commente moins l'œuvre que l'expérience qui la précède et l'accompagne'.[120] Yet, while it is in the inseparable mingling of life and creation that Blanchot attributes an importance to experience (as his attention is directed to the genesis of the work, the unfolding of the creative process, the conditions that both enable it and torture it), it cannot be said that he is interested in the life of the work or the intellectual life of the creator rather than the latter's 'ordinary' life. More precisely, while Blanchot begins by privileging the intellectual life of the author (in Hegelian terms, the life of the spirit, in Romantic terms, artistic genius) – echoing and subscribing to Mallarmé's saying 'l'écrivain

[116] Surya, *Georges Bataille. La mort à l'œuvre*, 122.
[117] Ibid. 450–1.
[118] Ibid. 293.
[119] Bident, *Maurice Blanchot. Partenaire invisible*, 197.
[120] Ibid.

n'a pas de biographie' – he ends up embracing – as he comments on, accompanying and in the company of Baudelaire – the more human, contingent and vulnerable aspects of a life.[121] On this subject he notes, posing as well the question of what the 'life' of writing is – and how it needs to be recast: 'l'hypothèse qui sépare définitivement l'homme et l'auteur […] pour plus proche qu'elle soit de la vérité poétique [...] fait de la création un absolu prodigieusement à l'abri des hasards et des accidents contre lesquels aucun homme, fût-il divin, n'a jamais été protégé'.[122]

Written reminiscences and personal correspondence

Bataille's handling of (and stance towards) annexes arises in (and with regard to) the celebrated and extensively commented 'Coïncidences' section of his first novel, *Histoire de l'œil*, published under the pseudonym Lord Auch.[123] The 'Coïncidences' section (later named 'Réminiscences'), offering an overly self-conscious acknowledgement of the unconscious impulses that have already asserted themselves in the narrative, attests to, as signalled by its title, a strong correspondence between the story (a frenzied initiation of two adolescents into eroticism and death) and the author's own turbulent life. Yet, as many critics have argued, as this appended section is included in the novel as its second part, its testimonial evidence (its autobiographical value) is undermined by the very gesture that aspired to foster it as such.[124] Therefore, as the 'Coïncidences' section upsets both the implication of narrativity and recollection in biographical truth as well as the conventional differentiation between a narrator and an author, *Histoire de l'œil* refuses to be subsumed under either autobiography or fiction.

Blanchot brings in the question of annexing in his literary essay dedicated to Antonin Artaud. Referring to Artaud's famous correspondence with Jacques Rivière, Blanchot directs his attention to the anomaly that characterizes the publication of the letters. Artaud, Blanchot reminds us, sends his first poems to the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, which are rejected by the director of the journal, Jacques Rivière. As an exchange between the two follows, the correspondence acquires literary value and is eventually published in the NRF, while some of

[121] As cited by Christophe Bident in his article 'La Biographie Maurice Blanchot', electronic version: http://blanchot.fr/fr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=52&Itemid=42.
[122] Maurice Blanchot, 'Une édition des Fleurs du Mal', *Faux pas*, 180.
[123] Georges Bataille, *L'Histoire de l'œil*, *OC III*.
[124] Patrick ffrench glosses the problematic and paradoxical status of the 'Coïncidences' epilogue in terms of the 'multiplication of the frame', as the framing of the fiction by the real occurs 'from within'. Leslie Hill underlines the (impossible) dialectics the epilogue enacts between legibility and (un)interpretability, since, while the narrator attempted to bring interpretation to an end, he finally opens the text to further reading. See, Patrick ffrench, *The Cut: Reading Bataille's Histoire de l'œil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 82–5 and Leslie Hill, *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot. Writing at the Limit* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 29–30.

the poems are published as complementary to the letters ('comme exemples et témoignage').[125] As the letters are published in the place of the poems, the correspondence (in which the young Artaud expresses his suffering which is amplified due to the fact that his poetic attempt offered no relief or appeasement to his tormented existence) is endowed with literary merit, while the poems end up being published as mere anecdotes that throw light on the letters. As Blanchot writes, with reference to the poems' deficiency 'comme si ce qui leur manquait, leur défaut, devenait plénitude et achèvement par l'expression ouverte de ce manque et l'approfondissement de sa nécessité'. And as he adds, referring to Rivière's (but mainly Blanchot's own) preference and interest in the experience that leads to the work rather than the work itself: 'Plus qu'à l'œuvre elle-même, c'est assurément à l'expérience de l'œuvre, au mouvement qui conduit jusqu'à elle, que Jacques Rivière s'intéresse [...]'.[126]

The reception of the Bataillean 'Coïncidences' section by criticism is grouped by Martin Crowley under the terms of the explanatory and the parodic: the explanatory approach considers the section as separate from the main text (the first part, explicitly entitled *récit*) and, thereby, undermines the value of the annexe – inasmuch as a literary work can never be reduced to its explanatory account (even if it is provided by the author, especially if, as in this case, what is offered by the author is autobiographical exegesis).[127] On the contrary, the parodic approach considers the section as indistinguishable from the main text (the *récit* part), and, thereby, insists on the value of the annexe – inasmuch as, in its inseparability from the first section, it accounts for the indivisible textuality of the story (*Histoire de l'œil*) as a whole.

This polarity, as Martin Crowley further shows, has been problematized more recently by an attempt to reconsider the value of the 'Coïncidences' section, while untying it (liberating it) from a textual reading (and from its labelling as parodic).[128] The attempt to take the section *à la lettre*, or at face value, is an attempt to read it as a trustworthy document that accounts for and records the unavoidable interference of the real – an interference that turns out to be both invasive and evasive. In this respect, Patrick ffrench insists on the two-sided framing of the fictional by the real as well as of the real by the fictional. As ffrench argues, the 'Coïncidences' section triggers a framing of the fictional (the *récit* section) by the real, inasmuch as it alludes primarily to the writing process, which is real indeed.[129] Accordingly, the term 'une fiction

[125] Maurice Blanchot, 'Artaud', *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 50.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Martin Crowley, 'Bataille's Tacky Touch' in *MLN* 119 (2004), 766–80 (772–3).
[128] Ibid. 773–4.
[129] ffrench, *The Cut*, 83.

réelle' is coined by Surya to underline that though the story might be fictional, the book is real.[130] Additionally, as the 'Coïncidences' section alludes to the real event of the direct blow to Manuel Granero's eye during a bullfight that resulted in his instantaneous death (on May 1922 in Madrid), as well as to more personal episodes of Bataille's life (such as the incident of the white of the syphilitic's father eyes), it results in a second framing of the fictional by the real. Yet, as ffrench has noted, as this framing of fiction happens from within (as it is the text of 'Coïncidences' that informs us about the real events that gave rise to the *récit*), the display of the traumatic origins of the story, however real, cannot be considered as determinant.[131]

Bringing in the broader issue of use of the first person in all of Bataille's narratives, Surya remarks that though it might be naïve to take the narratives as strictly autobiographical (as veracious accounts corresponding to the author's real life), it is equally unwise (or probably too prudent and prudish), to dismiss them as simply imaginary (invented).[132] In this respect, in *Histoire de l'œil* both the real and fiction find themselves constantly undermined and mutually contaminated: the reality of the events is undermined, inasmuch as they are added as complementary to the *récit*, and are thereby implicated in fiction, while the fictive status of the *récit* is undermined by the occurrence of the events, which dissuade us from not believing what is recounted.

Pseudonymity

This resistance of the real, the impossibility to sidestep and sublimate it though fiction, is further highlighted in the case of *Histoire de l'œil* by the pseudonym under which both sections are signed. 'Lord Auch', in all his apparent unreality, far from providing the author of the story with a self-owned identity (fulfilling thereby a fantasy of self-origination), results in reintroducing, intensifying and vitalizing the presence of the father.[133] Commenting on the paradox of the pseudonym, Surya notes that rather than achieving a movement away from reality, it brings about a violent initiation of the real (in its social and civil dimension of a name

[130] Surya, *Georges Bataille. La mort à l'œuvre*, 112.
[131] ffrench, *The Cut*, 84, 131.
[132] Surya, *Georges Bataille. La mort à l'œuvre*, 123.
[133] As Leslie Hill notes, Bataille's several pseudonyms (Lord Auch, Louis Trente, Pierre Angélique) do not, as pseudonyms commonly do, establish another (a literary) identity, but indicate, in their implausibility, the sacrifice of identity as such. The Bataillean pseudonyms, provocative and irreal, from which his writings originate, according to Leslie Hill 'advertise the fact that it is a false and assumed name' (Hill, *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot, Writing at the Limit*, 94). And yet, as such, in their implausibility, they attest and bear witness to Bataille's singular attitude with regard to writing. They both register and point to how writing for Bataille becomes the stage where identity is put at play, a place where the self, rather than re-presenting itself, is presented in its explosion, in its downfall.

and in its personal and psychic dimension of an overly traumatizing memory).[134] The father becomes at once magnified (recast as Lord, God), corporeal and horrific (as Auch stands for the abbreviated form 'aux chiottes', God reveals himself in his corporeality and monstrosity – relieving himself). Focusing on the German resonance of the term 'auch', Martin Crowley adds alongside the authorial presence of Lord Auch, the residual presence of Georges Bataille.[135] Hence, next to (not behind) Lord Auch there is also (*auch*) Bataille himself.

In light of these remarks, *Histoire de l'œil*, Bataille's first work of fiction, which wavers undecidedly between fiction and autobiography, can *also* be read as Bataille's literary manifesto, alongside 'Le Gros orteil' and *L'Expérience intérieure*, inasmuch as it announces – in perfect, absolute honesty – all of Bataille's subsequent endeavours, proclaiming how his work thereon will turn against the primacy of vision, that is, in metaphysical terms, the primacy of the present and presence, or, in architectural terms, what Denis Hollier refers to as 'prétensions édifiantes' – without nonetheless succumbing, through an exaltation of blindness, to the Romantic imagery of the nocturnal and darkness.[136] In erotic terms, this first narrative shows how Eros will be recast not as life-affirming but as inextricably bound to death.

Anonymity

The issue of autobiography is tackled by Blanchot in his critical essay on Artaud, where, as already mentioned, predominance is given to Artaud's confessional letters rather than his first poems. In doing so, Blanchot devalues the literary work (as it offers no frame or appeasement to one's tortured existence) and endows with literary value the record of the lived experience from which the work emanates. This displacement of the centre of gravity from the literary work (which becomes secondary) to the experience of (its) writing (which becomes prevalent) is glossed by Blanchot in Artaud's case in terms of writing *despite* the void (admitting one's impotence to get rid of it) rather than *against* it (hoping that one might get rid of it). Blanchot remarks, with reference to the poems, 'Artaud écrivait contre le vide et pour s'y dérober',

[134] As Surya informs us, Bataille appears to have said that he wrote in order to erase his name. In this respect, Surya notes, the recourse to a pseudonym is not simply an act of dissimulation but a sovereign act that aspires to break with the paternal name and the family heritage that have been imposed (a fate more complex than that of Oedipus, at least of its psychoanalytical appropriation, as Bataille's syphilitic father was already blind). And yet, as Surya shows, the name of the father bursts violently into the name invented by the son. Surya, *Georges Bataille. La mort à l'œuvre*, 112–3.

[135] Crowley, 'Bataille's Tacky Touch', 774.

[136] Denis Hollier, 'La Prise de la Concorde' in *La Prise de la Concorde, suivi de Les Dimanches de la Vie. Essais sur Georges Bataille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 52. Commenting on how Bataille introduces the play of writing against all hierarchical structure, Hollier notes: 'L'écriture en ce sens serait un geste profondément anti-architectural, geste non pas constructif, mais qui mine et qui ruine au contraire tout ce qui vit de prétentions édifiantes'.

adding with reference to the letters, 'il écrit maintenant en s'y exposant et en essayant de l'exprimer et d'en tirer expression').[137] Finally, Blanchot concludes by endorsing the culminating inseparability between life and thought in Artaud, as he points out 'car jamais Artaud n'acceptera le scandale d'une pensée separée de la vie'.[138]

Yet, while Artaud and Blanchot share the view that intellectual activity needs to be infused with life (Artaud himself proclaimed that 'on ne sépare pas le corps de l'esprit, ni le sens de l'intelligence [...]'), their views radically diverge with regard to what counts and needs to be re-introduced as life.[139] In Artaud's case, life is thought in terms of intensity and of a sensual (bodily) experience that implicates one's nervous sensibility; in Blanchot's case, life amounts to the dedication of one's life to writing, which renders the experience of writing a 'lived experience' in its own right.[140] In this respect, the value of Blanchot's essay on Artaud is neither that it fosters literary criticism as a mode of autobiography nor that it brings in the conception of the work's autobiography (in a way that parallels the approach of 'critique génétique' in its interest in the genesis of the work and broader questions of creation) but that it challenges received notions of autobiography by redrawing the boundaries between life and writing.

In the inseparability of life and writing as comprehended and put forward by Blanchot, the term and process of 'autobiography' can be reconfigured and brought about in its strictest and most literal sense: the life (bios) of writing (graphy) recounted by writing itself (auto). In parallel, this also proves to be the most appropriate (impossible) autobiography of Blanchot (himself), the most exact and (im)personal account of Blanchot's life – of a life dedicated to and eroded by the question of writing.

In his discussion of autobiography, commenting on the subject (subjectivity) which is its subject matter (its theme), Lacoue-Labarthe notices, despite the prefix 'auto', a double lack: a lack of substance (selfhood) and of consistency (sameness).[141] Moreover, he marks out the fragment '('Une Scène primitive?')' of *L'Ecriture du désastre* and the short narrative *L'Instant de ma mort* as Blanchot's two autobiographical texts, namely, as signalled by their title, a

[137] Blanchot, 'Artaud', 56.
[138] Ibid. 57.
[139] Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 134–5.
[140] Artaud's major work *Le Théâtre et son double* calls for a theatre that addresses and speaks to the viewer's *sensual experience*. Theatre's double is life and life needs to come to the forefront and occupy the theatrical scene, as a combination of gestures, sounds and lighting, that will shock and address the body of the spectator and overthrow written language and theatrical dialogues that address the mind of the audience.
[141] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'La Contestation de la mort' in *Le Nouveau Magazine Littéraire* 424 (2003/10), 58–60 (58). A fuller version of the article appears in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Agonie terminée, agonie interminable. Sur Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Galilée, 2004).

childhood scene and a death scene, a childhood memory and a death memory and ponders over the fact that in both texts Blanchot speaks (of himself) in the third person. Differentiating autobiographical enunciation from the general question of the subject's enunciation (which results in the constitution of the thinking subject as split), as well as from classical narrative enunciation (in its firm distinction between an author and a narrator), Lacoue-Labarthe finally deduces from the Blanchotian use of the third person the founding rule of autobiography: to write itself, the subject of autobiography must somehow absent itself; it must already somehow be dead, in order to write itself – as another.[142] In light of this account, autobiography is glossed by Lacoue-Labarthe both as *autothanatographie* and as *allobiographie*.

Autobiography is additionally recast by Lacoue-Labarthe in terms of a process, not simply in the sense that it is the procedure, the activity (rather than the object, the product, the result – the argument as such or the argument in its veracity) that counts, but in the judicial and legal sense of the term, which is 'to bring proceedings' ('« engager un procès »'), to put on trial, in brief, to come together to dispute. [143] In this respect, what is put on trial in the autobiographical process is not merely subjectivity, but more broadly and more crucially, attestation. Autobiography shows, for Lacoue-Labarthe, how to attest is always to con-test, as con-testation – in its strictest sense, that is cum-testari (bearing witness with) – is always implicated in attestation (in bearing witness).

Finally, slightly modifying the Nietzschean remark that attributes to Plato the invention of the novel of antiquity (rather than the invention of philosophy), Lacoue-Labarthe suggests that, if an invention needs to be attributed to Plato, it would be that of autobiography (rather than that of the novel). With particular reference to the Platonic *Phaedo*, Lacoue-Labarthe declares that it should be re-read as the impossible autobiography of Socrates ('l'impossible autobiographie de Socrate, « celui qui n'écrivait pas »') – of the one who did not write and left (himself) no trace of his existence (Socrates) by the one who could not write, especially his thoughts about death, as himself (Plato).[144]

Elaborating upon Lacoue-Labarthe's insights, one can undertake to read Blanchot's *L'Entretien infini*, in its both rigorous and conversational tone, as Blanchot's oblique homage to both Plato and Socrates, as Blanchot's impossible autobiography, an allo-biography that

[142] Lacoue-Labarthe, 'La Contestation de la mort', 58.
[143] Lacoue-Labarthe, 'La Contestation de la mort', 59.
[144] Lacoue-Labarthe, 'La Contestation de la mort', 60.

records his post-war obsessive immersion in (and dispossession due to) the question of writing, as well as to the question of the other (allos). As the Blanchot of *L'Entretien infini* draws on and addresses, empties out and exhausts the itinerary of writing (its audacious and uneventful life – whose audacity and uneventfulness consist precisely in that it is recounting itself/its lack), he also, by the same token, offers an account of his life – a life not dedicated simply to the question of writing, but to the relentless questioning that the existence of writing poses to one's own existence.

And yet, what is at stake in the above suggestions of requalification, tentative as they are, is not genre specification and classification or genre hybridity. What is at stake is to show how truth and fiction, the real and the unreal (from a Bataillean standpoint), literature and reality, life and work (from a Blanchotian standpoint) are mutually exposed to (and implicated within) one another – in a series of displacements without the possibility of localization, in a series of reduplications which can neither be brought into conclusion within the stable site of writing nor attributed to a life, one's life, as their originating point of reference. The mutual exposure between the 'life' of writing and the 'worldly' life we know points towards their interrelatedness, despite the former's suspension and dispersal of the latter. The motif of mutual exposure, which is a revolt against the authority of presence and identity of whatever kind, will be followed and intensified in part II by the confusion between 'what is' and 'what is not' – a confusion that, as I will show in detail, relates to both the literary and the real.

Part II: CONFUSIONS

Modernism, it is well known, brings in a subjectivist perspective on worldly reality. At times, it also aspires to cast out the presence of worldly reality from the domain of literature and art. Flaubert's desire to write a book about nothing as well as Manet's paintings that are admirable in, and precisely due to, their thematic insignificance, are indicative of modernism's aims. The subject of the work is insignificant, nothing but a pretext, as the true subject of the work is itself. In the case of the literary work, language becomes its content and, more specifically, language in its non-communicative and intransitive dimension, that is, language outside communicative and instrumental use. Both Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot adhere and pay homage to the tradition of literary modernism: Blanchot not simply by dedicating an essay to Flaubert, but by considering, in principle, the experience of writing as the direct opposite of being in the world; similarly, Bataille not only dedicates a book to Manet but, transferring the attributes of inner experience to literature, designates as the object of the latter nothing but itself. And yet, as I hope to show, both writers radicalize the modernist heritage, as they move beyond subjectivist presentation and conceive writing in terms of a (non-)relation to a pre-subjective and pre-objective real.

This part focuses on Blanchot's and Bataille's two major works of the 1950's, dedicated to literature, namely *L'Espace littéraire* published in 1955 and *La Littérature et le mal* published in 1957. The titles of the texts attest to the significance that both writers attribute to literature. While the term 'space' figures more prominently in Blanchot's title, both writers attempt to explore and map literature's place in the world, both attempt and struggle to situate literature as both within and outside the world. Put somewhat schematically, the challenge, from the point of view of literature's engagement with the world, is the following: if literature engages too closely with the world, if it is too much *in* the world, it loses its specificity; yet, if it cuts itself off from the world, placing itself *outside* it, it loses its effectiveness. Inversely, and from the point of view of the relation to otherness, the outside, the beyond, the challenge can be articulated in the following terms: attention needs to be paid both to the importance of relation (so that there is relation) and to the importance of distance (so that the other is not reduced to the same – the order of things, the logic of identity and utility).

The previous section, by way of two tropes that radically recast Hegelian negativity and indicate the impossibility of negation (namely the *il y a* and *négativé sans emploi*), examined the reconfiguration of existence in terms of extreme affirmation and of resistance to the force

of negation. In brief, the focus of the previous section was the impossibility of not-being. Conversely, the focus of this section (through a detailed analysis of the notions of the 'image' and the 'instant') is the impossibility of being. In this respect, the irreducibility of presence, as attested in the previous section, will be joined up with an account of the entanglement of the non-existent to the existent and of disappearance in appearance.

Chapter 4
The imaginary: the real of literature

Mais qu'arrive-t-il quand ce qu'on voit, quoique à distance, semble vous toucher par un contact saisissant, quand la manière de voir est une sorte de touche, quand voir est un *contact* à distance ? (Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire*)

In the famous final line of her essay 'Against Interpretation' published in 1964, Susan Sontag, attacking the hermeneutic approach in its constant search for meaning, announces: 'In place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art'.[1] The essay 'Against Interpretation' alludes to and deplores the passage from an experience of art, where art is considered as a ritual, to a theory of art, first posed by Plato, where art is thought of in terms of mimesis and representation. Sontag examines the persistence of the mimetic theory of art, tracing it not only through the opponents, but most notably, through the defenders of art, who, overemphasizing the content of an artwork (as opposed to its form), assume and argue that a work of art always 'says something', and hence calls for interpretation. Sontag criticizes this modern hegemony of content, since in her view it attests to an enduring Platonic dualism, inasmuch as apart from, behind, beneath the manifest, the appearance, there lies – hidden – the latent, truth.[2] In her arguing against this Platonic posture, she allies herself with Oscar Wilde's praise of appearance, as fashioned in his epigraph that opens the essay: 'the mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible'.

Sontag goes on to observe that it is literature that has particularly suffered from the overemphasis on the idea of content, and gives the example of Kafka, whose puzzling work has been interpreted as all kinds of allegory: social, psychoanalytic and religious. Of course, in her polemic against criticism, or at least its prevailing tendency, Sontag, a critic herself, asserts its exigency. She therefore asks: 'What kind of criticism, of commentary on the arts, is desirable

[1] Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation' in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), 3–14 (14).
[2] While Plato himself condemned the mimetic function of art as a degraded copy of a copy and, hence, rendered art synonymous to untruth.

today? [...] What would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place?'.[3] Thus she calls for a transparent criticism that would allow us to see 'the thing in itself', 'things being what they are' and that would sharpen our deadened sensory experience, enabling us 'to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more'.[4] As she declares in a concluding remark: 'The function of criticism should be to show *how it* [the work of art] *is what it is,* even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*'.[5]

In *L'Espace littéraire*, his collection of critical essays written in the early 1950's, a decade before Sontag's article, Maurice Blanchot both anticipates and endorses the anti-interpretative stance of literature and art celebrated by Sontag. Again, with particular reference to Kafka, with whom Blanchot shares an absolute belonging to literature ('« Je ne suis que littérature et je ne peux ni je veux être rien d'autre »'),[6] Ann Smock, in her introduction to the *Space of Literature*, observes that Blanchot is not interested in Kafka's *work*, in the actual *object* produced by the writer, but rather in the torturing experience of the young man who seems unable to write.[7] This inability, this impossibility to write, particularly attracts Blanchot, since for him therein lies the 'mystery' of literature. In its impossibility, the literary work (oeuvre) is radically different from the work as productive activity and effective action (travail); being ineffective, unproductive, the *oeuvre* for Blanchot becomes almost synonymous with *désœuvrement*.

Blanchot's marking out of literature as a special realm which revolves around a fundamental tension, as analyzed in the previous chapter, is further developed in his major work dedicated to literature, *L'Espace littéraire*. The artwork (and by the same token, fiction, where speech is the artist's material), rests outside the world, the world of action – and yet, this does not, in any way, mean that art exists for art's sake (as a certain tradition of aestheticism might suggest); moreover, art is anti-mimetic, non-representational – and yet, this does not indicate that a literary work exists as an artefact, which, representing nothing, presents merely itself, enclosed in a narcissistic self-referentiality (as a tradition of formalism or hermetism might contend). It is precisely this tensional third space, in defiance of the persistently recurring dichotomies, that is designated by Blanchot as the constituent space of art and literature.

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[3] Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', 12.
[4] Ibid. 14 (italics in the text).
[5] Ibid (italics in the text).
[6] As quoted by Blanchot in Maurice Blanchot, 'Kafka et la littérature', *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 20.
[7] Ann Smock, 'Translator's Introduction' in Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, transl. Ann Smock (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 9.

A spatial account of literature in terms of a third space is already given in 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', which we examined in the previous section. As already mentioned, literature's right to death is its absolute freedom, its right to the total negation of reality, as realised in and as language; yet, literature's right to death is also the poetic attempt to recover, through the materiality of language, the pre-linguistic materiality of things that dies in everyday language. The essay sketches literature as an intermediary space, in the sense that it never coincides with either of its two slopes, remaining constantly divided and suspended between them, between negation and what cannot be negated, between revelation and what resists being revealed. The conception of literature as a tensional third space in *L'Espace littéraire* arises though a more insistent and detailed questioning of the artwork's origin. Problematizing both the dependency of art on the realm of the world as well as the autonomy of art as world-disclosing and self-originating, the Blanchot of *L'Espace littéraire* succeeds in putting forth literature as both anti-realist and anti-foundationalist as well as in reconfiguring, via literature, a new way of relating to the world. Therefore, space (the space of literature), one might argue, is where the question of relationality is radically reconfigured. Space is neither a boundless, all-encompassing entity in its own right, nor an a priori that structures and makes possible sensible experience. Literary space is rather an opening which occurs due to the process of writing and, more broadly, of composition. And yet, as I hope to show, the spatial opening involved here is a venue of discordant and missed encounters rather than a site of inauguration or emergence, and spatiality is rethought of in terms of a lived experiential order where oppositions between distance and proximity, separation and contact, remoteness and immediacy, become inoperative.

In what follows, I will unfold and critically examine the ways in which Blanchot's idiosyncratic conception of literature does not comply with the prevailing philosophical, aesthetic and literary tradition: first, through an inquiry into the central notion of the *image*, and with particular reference to 'Les Deux versions de l'imaginaire' and 'Le Regard d'Orphée' of *L'Espace littéraire*, I will go into how the pivotal distinction between 'what is' and its representation, which goes hand in hand with the mimetic theory of art – that, albeit disguisedly, still persists – is called into question; then, with particular reference to the 'Le Chant de Sirènes. La Rencontre de l'Imaginaire' of *Le Livre à venir* and an inquiry into the key term of the *event,* I will show how the postulate of presentation, and its counterpart in the anti-mimetic theory of art, is also challenged. In doing so, I will reveal how Blanchot's vision of art and literature, while in principle aligning with Sontag's claims, as exposed in 'Against Interpretation', questions and mistrusts her call, which is an ongoing call and demand on art to

compel us to 'see more, hear more, feel more'. Despite the presence of sensory elements in Blanchot's key essays (the gaze, the song, the voice), the two main encounters that are staged, that of Orpheus with Eurydice and that of Ulysses with the Sirens, revolve around numbness and stupor, rather than the sharpening of the senses, to the degree that the image proves blinding, rather than eye-opening, and the song requests deafness, rather than hearing. I hope to show then, slightly paraphrasing Oscar Wilde's maxim, that for Blanchot the mystery of the world lies at the turning point, where the visible opens to the invisible.

Emmanuel Levinas, Blanchot's lifelong friend and companion (in Blanchot's words 'mon plus ancien ami, le seul qui m'autorise d'un tutoiment'),[8] alludes to the unparalleled significance of art in Blanchot's thinking::

> Déjà pour Heidegger l'art, au-delà de toute signification esthétique, faisait luire la vérité de l'être, mais il avait cela en commun avec d'autres formes d'existence. Pour Blanchot la vocation de l'art est hors pair. Mais surtout, écrire ne conduit pas à la « vérité de l'être » [mais] à l'erreur de l'être – à l'être comme lieu de l'errance, à l'inhabitable.[9]

Levinas clearly shows Blanchot's affinity with and divergence from Heidegger's understanding of art: both thinkers defy the traditional understanding of art as an object to be contemplated from a distance as well as the modern understanding of art as existing for its own sake. Art for both is understood in a non-aesthetic sense, as the mode of being of the artwork puts forth and calls for another understanding of 'being'. Yet, art becomes unequalled for Blanchot, not as a site of disclosure of truth (including literary truth), but rather as a space, a spacing, of errancy ('err' here is meant in its double sense, both as wandering and as going wrong, being incorrect). As literature leads, to borrow Levinas' phrasing, '*à l'être comme lieu de l'errance*', Blanchot's spatial account of the artwork inverts the logic of manifestation that characterizes the Heideggerian movement of concealment and unconcealment, veiling and unveiling and puts forth a resistance to visibility. In this sense, art for Blanchot is not inclined towards the pole of revelation and shining (being, truth, presence), as in Heidegger, but rather towards that of concealment and obscurity (disappearing, not being, absence). Yet, as dissimulation adheres to a logic of movement, tension and strife, it does not correspond to – nor does it end up in – a new viewpoint from the other side, as in the romantic exaltation of the

[8] This phrase is used by Blanchot in a letter to Salomon Malka, Levinas' friend and disciple, written in 1988. The opening line of the letter is 'Je crois qu'il est connu tout ce que je dois à Emmanuel Lévinas, aujourd'hui mon plus ancien ami, le seul qui m'autorise d'un tutoiement': http://ghansel.free.fr/blanchot.html.
[9] Emmanuel Levinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975), 19.

nocturnal, where the longing for the whole re-enters and the harmonious oneness of day and night is transfigured as 'the other night' (*l'autre nuit*).[10]

Before giving my attention to the resistance to visibility and to the importance of bewilderment rather than transparence, obscurity rather than lucidity and sharpening, dissonance and confusion rather than unison and fusion, I will first linger on the questioning of an artwork not in terms of 'what' but rather in terms of 'how' and 'that' – a displacement which Sontag encourages, and which finds a radicalised formulation in *L'Espace littéraire*. In the chapter dedicated to Mallarmé, Blanchot endows art and literature with an ontological force and poses a vital question: 'Qu'arrive-t-il par le fait que nous avons la littérature ? Qu'en est-il de l'être si l'on dit que « quelque chose comme les Lettres existe » ?'.[11] The same question, a question that underlies and, in a way stimulates, the entire Blanchotian *oeuvre,* is also found in a note that precedes *L'Entretien infini*, another of his crucial works, formulated as follows : 'Qu-est-ce qui est en jeu par le fait que quelque chose comme l'art ou la littérature existerait ?*'*.[12] The crucial shift from 'what' to 'that', from *what* a being is to the fact *that* it is, has its precedent in Heidegger's famous essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*. In it, I summarize briefly, the artwork is conceptualized, and rethought of in terms of presentation (rather than representation), as an entity that, by its not belonging to the familiar context of everyday objects, shows itself, positing itself (its own truth), and inviting to be looked upon as something 'that is' (*es gibt*). Blanchot's thinking on the matter both builds on and diverges significantly from this Heideggerian tribute to art. Following Heidegger, Blanchot's consideration of the 'that', the fact that art (or literature) is, goes in conjunction with the 'how', the particularity – as Heidegger would put it – 'its manner, its mode, its way of being'. In this respect, Blanchot distances himself from Heidegger and, echoing Mallarmé, asks 'whether' something like literature exists. And to Heidegger's affirmation that the artwork *is* (rather than is not), Blanchot adds that *it is* and *is not*:

[10] The romantic 'other night' is not merely the absence of daylight or the disappearance of things in darkness, it consists precisely in the apparition of the disappearance of things. Blanchot's distancing from the romantic exaltation of the night occurs in his discussion of *Igitur*, where he juxtaposes Mallarmé's account of death and suicide in *Igitur* to the Romantic attempt to find in death something more than – and beyond – death. In this regard, he writes: 'dans la mort, Novalis, comme la plupart des romantiques allemands, cherche un au-delà de la mort, un plus que la mort, le retour à l'état total transfiguré, comme dans la nuit, non pas la nuit, mais le tout pacifié du jour et de la nuit'. Blanchot, 'L'Expérience d'*Igitur*', *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 140.

[11] Blanchot, 'L'Expérience de Mallarmé', *L'Espace littéraire*, 44.

[12] Maurice Blanchot, 'Note', *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), vi.

> L'œuvre d'art se réduit à l'être… C'est cela sa tâche, être, rendre présent « ce mot même : *c'est* »... « tout le mystère est là ». Mais en même temps, on ne peut pas dire que l'*œ*uvre appartienne à l'être, qu'elle existe. Au contraire, ce qu'il faut dire c'est qu'elle n'existe jamais à la manière d'une chose ou d'un être en général. Ce qu'il faut dire, en réponse à notre question, c'est que la littérature n'existe pas […].[13]

The above passage suggests how Blanchot's questioning about literature converges with, and can be approached through, a thinking about the imaginary, in as much as neither *properly* exist and, yet, both have a haunting presence. In other words, imagination for Blanchot is not what the fantastic is for Todorov; it is not ascribed and confined to a particular genre, but is the founding condition, the very essence, the real of literature. And in order to explore and designate the imaginary as the vital space of literature, a prior investigation into the key notion of the 'image' is required.

Firstly, one should note that in the Blanchotian lexicon, the terms art and literature are often used interchangeably, since for him they both belong to, and are defined as, the realm of images (in opposition to that of concepts or signs); a contention which is, more or less, acceptable regarding art, but which seems odd with regard to literature. And yet, Blanchot insists on equating literature and literary language with the notion and the function of the 'image' and often uses the terms fiction, image, imagination (the latter defined as the realm of images) as equivalent. In this respect, in the first section of *L'Espace littéraire*, we read:

> est-ce que, dans le poème, dans la littérature, le langage ne serait pas, par rapport au langage courant, ce qu'est l'image par rapport à la chose ? […] est-ce que le langage lui-même ne devient pas, dans la littérature, tout entière image […] image de langage […] ou encore langage imaginaire, langage que personne ne parle, c'est à dire qui se parle à partir de sa propre absence, comme l'image apparaît sur l'absence de la chose […] ? [14]

And then, right away, aware and disquieted that such a statement might be perceived as a conventional belief in art as mimetic, Blanchot adds:

> Ne sommes pas sur une voie où il nous faudrait revenir à des opinions, heureusement délaissées, analogues à celle qui voyait jadis dans l'art une imitation, une copie du réel ? […] D'après l'analyse commune, l'image est après l'objet. […] Mais peut-être

[13] Blanchot, 'L'Expérience de Mallarmé', 44.
[14] Blanchot, 'La Solitude essentielle', *L'Espace littéraire*, 31–2.

> l'analyse commune se trompe-t-elle. Peut-être avant d'aller plus loin, faut-il se demander : mais qu'est-ce qu'est l'image ? [15]

There are two key points to investigate here, both of which are constructed around the notion of the 'image': the first concerns the alliance between literature and art, inasmuch as it is construed, for Blanchot, from their relation to the image, and the second the widespread belief of a divergence between reality and the image, along with the derivation of the latter from the former, a belief that Blanchot has the urge, albeit reluctantly, to defy. The comparison between art and literature is, of course, quite ancient and common. Levinas, despite his personal disagreement with such a view, admits that art has always been, and still is, generally considered to be inextricably linked with expression, in the sense that an artist, whether a painter or a musician, tells, even of the ineffable, and that a poem or a painting speaks ('le poème ou le tableau parle'), precisely where common language hesitates or gives up.[16] Against this context, Blanchot's contrivance lies in the fact that, as already mentioned, he frames the complicity between art and literature in their connection, not with expression, but with the image. The question that therefore arises, and that this chapter investigates, is what new access is offered to art and literature, if we displace our angle of attack from expression (and interpretation) to that of the image.

The passion of the image: the becoming image of the thing

In the above cited fragment, Blanchot brings to our attention, and seems to call into question, the prevalent philosophical tradition of the distinction between an original (reality) and a copy (the image or imagination), which comes after, in the double sense of being both posterior and inferior. But even if we track the line of thought which strongly opposes the bad reputation that the image has suffered from Plato onwards – be it the Kantian magnifying of imagination, as a synthetic power, presupposed in (and necessary to) experience and understanding, or the Husserlian stance, which appraises imagination as an effective resource for transcendence and hence the critique of the real – we realise that what has never been confronted and challenged is the firm separation between the real (what is) and its image. In what follows, I will argue that Blanchot's theory of the image (and the imaginary) casts the shadow of a doubt over the certainty of this solid separation of 'what is' over language, of a model over its image. Or, to

[15] Ibid. 32.
[16] Emmanuel Levinas, 'La Réalité et son ombre', *Les imprévus de l'histoire* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994), 123. The paradox of Levinas' essay 'La Réalité et son ombre', lies in that, although it contains some of the most astute comments on the ethical underpinnings of the image, in its relation to 'being', it was initially written as an unrelenting attack on visual arts and a privileging of criticism over art.

phrase my argument in a Blanchotian way, I will explore what it means 'to live an event as an image'.[17]

Of course, as might already be expected by now, the Blanchotian analysis of the 'image' does not avail itself of the common usage of the term. Inverting the premises, the image is not linked to seeing, sight, visibility and the virility of the gaze, but rather to the sensory, contact, touch and dispossession. In Blanchot's words:

> Mais qu'arrive-t-il quand ce qu'on voit, quoique à distance, semble vous toucher par un contact saisissant, quand la manière de voir est une sorte de touche, quand voir est un *contact* à distance ? Quand ce qui est vu s'impose au regard, comme si le regard était saisi, touché, mis en contact avec l'apparence ?[18]

The question is not rhetorical and the answer is provided a few lines further on: 'Ce qui nous est donné par un contact à distance est l'image, et la fascination est la passion de l'image'.[19] The originality of Blanchot's view does not lie in the association of the image with tactility and the affective response on behalf of the viewer, but in that it sets up a double reversal : firstly, what is seen imposes itself, in an insistent presence, so it is not us who, voluntarily, see an image, it is rather the image that, despite us, seizes us; secondly, and perhaps more importantly, distance (separation) unexpectedly becomes contact (a relation).

The formulation 'contact at a distance' is repeated twice and is given as the definition of the image. The distinguishing feature of distance here, or more precisely of distancing, is that it belongs to the heart of the thing itself. In *Les Deux versions de l'imaginaire*, a text annexed to *L'Espace littéraire*, Blanchot describes the scene, when we are face to face with things themselves, fixing our gaze upon a face (or a corner of the wall), and we let ourselves be taken by what we see, abandoning ourselves to its mercy. In the above scene, where the thing we stare at sinks (disappears) into its image, the following happens, says Blanchot: while the thing is grasped and offered to understanding, in its becoming image, it is ungraspable and unreal ('la chose était là, que nous saisissions dans le mouvement vivant d'une action comprehensive, – et, devenue image, instantanément la voilà devenue l'insaisissable, l'inactuelle, l'impassible').[20]

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[17] The phrasing 'vivre un événement en image' appears twice in the annexe 'Les Deux versions de l'imaginaire', *L'Espace littéraire*, 352, 353.
[18] Blanchot, 'La Solitude essentielle', 28–9 (italics in the text).
[19] Ibid. 29.
[20] Ibid. 343.

The Blanchotian conception of the image as the dissolution, that is, the absence, the absenting of the thing, follows the Sartrean reasoning on this matter. In *L'Imaginaire,* Sartre famously gives the example of his friend Pierre, currently present in London, and therefore, inasmuch as he appears to him as imaged, appears as absent.[21] And Sartre goes on, declaring, 'cette absence de principe, ce néant essentiel de l'objet imagé suffit à le différencier des objets de la perception'.[22] For both Sartre and Blanchot, imagination does not consist of the rearrangement, the reordering in an unused and inventive way, of images already given to perception; imagination rests upon, and is possible by, as Timothy Clark puts it, 'the ability to *detach* reality from itself'.[23] But, the distancing that constitutes the essence of imagination, its power of, in Clark's phrasing, 'sidestepping the world itself', is taken on quite divergently by Sartre and Blanchot.[24] Sartre opts for a phenomenological standpoint and, faithful to his political project, treats the image as a result of an act of consciousness and imagination as engaged in the task of freedom. For him, it is due to our imagination, our ability to detach and negate reality (the world as it is), that we can conceive of, and therefore fight for, a world different from the one we actually live in. As Sartre himself puts it, in terms that resonate the Hegelian equation of determination with negation 'poser une image […] c'est donc tenir le réel à distance, s'en affranchir, en un mot le nier'.[25] According to the Hegelian logic of negation followed by Sartre, something, to be what it is, needs to be determined conceptually, that is, negated, and therefore, also, not be. Blanchot, on the other hand, lingers upon the ontology of the image and considers its inherent distance, its constitutive distancing, as an event with an ontological significance. The mode of being of the image is incompatible with consciousness, since the 'I' is stripped of its power to make sense, as well as with unconsciousness, since the image is nevertheless present and exerts a fascination upon us.

For Blanchot, an object, when it becomes image, turns into a non-object. In his definition, the image is 'cette chose comme éloignement, la présente dans son absence […], apparaîssant en tant que disparue';[26] moreover, the relation between an image and its object is thought of in terms of 'resemblance' and 'doubleness'. At this point, Blanchot makes an ontological claim about the image, showing how its existence affects the very being of the object: resemblance,

[21] Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940, 1986, 2005), 346.
[22] Ibid. 34.
[23] Timothy Clark*, Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*. *Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 77 (emphasis in the text).
[24] Ibid.
[25] Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, 352.
[26] Blanchot, 'Les Deux versions de l'imaginaire', 343.

the image, imagining, is possible because beings are bound with a certain non-being. Or to borrow Levinas' phrasing for the fundamental duality that constitutes a person or a thing, and who also employs the key-term 'ressemblance' (situating resemblance within being): 'l'être n'est pas seulement lui-même, il s'échappe';[27] 'l'être est ce qui est [...] et, à la fois, il se ressemble, est sa propre image.'[28] Similarly, for Levinas, reality is not only what is, but at the same time *is* its double, its shadow, its image, as the very title of his essay 'La Réalité et son ombre' indicates: 'la réalité ne serait pas seulement c'est qu'elle est, ce qu'elle se dévoile dans la verité, mais aussi son double, son ombre, son image'.[29] To relate the (un)workings of the image to our discussion of the 'il y a' in the previous chapter, through the image, reality (the things and the world, appearance and manifestation) begins to disintegrate and fade away, whereas the 'il y a' indicates the reality of irreality. Furthermore, the 'il y a' makes inoperative mainly the distinction between presence and absence, whereas the image – in Blanchot's rethinking of it – makes inoperative the distinctions of the sensible and the intelligible, the visible and the invisible as much as that of presence and absence.

The image, therefore, in its ontological dimension as put forth by Blanchot, offers a dis-incarnation of reality, inasmuch as it alludes to the fact that something is and at the same time is not. This is why from a Blanchotian point of view, the image is not bound up with freedom, as it is for Sartre, but is rather linked with the cadaver's strangeness, which occupies a fragile and indeterminate place, both here and behind, and whose unfamiliar presence fluctuates between being and not being. Additionally, the understanding of the Blanchotian image in terms of the cadaver's strangeness emerges both as a reinscription of resemblance against originality and authenticity as well as as a radical critique of resemblance, inasmuch as it consists of a resemblance which resembles nothing. The cadaver's presence radicalizes the logic of resemblance as it brings forth an excess of similarity, nothing but similarity and similarity to nothing (as the initial to which it resembles and directs is reduced to nothing).

The passion of writing: the becoming image of language

If Blanchot's conception of the becoming image of the thing destabilizes the philosophical-metaphysical tradition (the privileging of 'the world' against its image), his definition of literature as the becoming image of language shakes the premises of aesthetics (the privileging

[27] Levinas, 'La Réalité et son ombre', 133.
[28] Ibid. 134.
[29] Ibid. 133.

of art and beauty) – be it the Kantian turn to the notion of beauty in his *Third Critique* (where Kant sets up the essential distinction between representation, where 'what is' is reduced to an 'object' by and for the subject, and presentation, where, crucially and conversely, the schematizing powers of the subject are suspended), or the Romantic postulate, which posits imagination (in contrast to reason) as the supreme faculty of the mind (since it bestows upon human beings a creativity comparable to that of nature and God), or even the Heideggerian anti-aesthetic stance, in its exaltation of art as a crucial site for the disclosure of truth, which moves away from the usual understanding of art, in terms of representation (as a relation of equivalence and equation) towards a renewed understanding of it, in terms of presentation (as an unveiling, a self-founding moment). Against this context, Blanchot sets up a heretical literary paradigm, whose deviance, as I will show, is due to the notion and the function of the image.

The Romantic tradition, in the aftermath of the Kantian crisis of presentation, praises the auto-sufficiency of the artwork as a unity complete in itself (inasmuch as it signifies nothing by itself), 'an expression for the sake of expression', as Novalis pronounces in his defence of literature as non-instrumental language.[30] As opposed to thought's inability to become transparent and self-reflexive (the 'I think' brings about and comes with all my representations but it cannot re-present itself), art aspires to restore the unison between the subject of representation and the represented object. Andrew Bowie, in his account of the stakes of Romanticism, gives as an example of a self-reflexive painting, *Las Meninas*, which unravels and, in an anticipatory way, resolves, the subsequent Kantian, and post-Kantian, puzzle, as crystallized in the formulation of Novalis : 'Can I look for a schema for myself, if I am that which schematises ?'.[31] As Bowie reminds us, Velasquez's *Las Meninas*, attests both to the importance of the painter, without whom there would be no painting at all, and at the same time, by including him within the painting, inverts the state of affairs and renders him a result of reflection, an object as well, rather than merely the creating subject. In this sense, Bowie underlines, our direct access to (and the self-representation of) what generates the painting (Velazquez), is undermined, since the creator, as we see him painted, actually depends for his own depiction upon his reflection in a non-existent mirror. Indeed, as the viewer realizes, what the painter is looking at, outside the painting, is not himself in a mirror (in order to paint

[30] Novalis, *Philosophical writings*, ed. and transl. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany: State University of New York Press), 78.
[31] Novalis as quoted by Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity. From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990, 2003), 90.

himself) but, as the mirror on the farthest wall of the painting indicates, the painter is looking at the supposedly empirical object he is painting, that is, the King and Queen of Spain. *Las Meninas* therefore stages an intricate interplay, interdependence and coexistence between its inner and outer space, presence and absence, the subject and the assumed object of the painting (Velasquez and the King and Queen of Spain) and their respective reflections (in the painting itself and in the painted mirror). And yet, in his analysis of *Las Meninas*, in terms of a self-reflexive painting which chooses as its theme the undoing of the subject's self-representation, Bowie attests to the significance of the painter 'not least as the ironic creator of a baffling aesthetic object'.[32]

Against this context, which depends on and solidifies the notion and the endurance of the 'creator' and 'the aesthetic object', establishing between them – and an assumed 'reality' – a restless interdependence, as each term points constantly to another, in Blanchot's *L'Espace littéraire* the centre of attention is displaced around a triple dispersal. In this respect, 'Le regard d'Orphée', which is portrayed as the hidden and attracting centre of the book, revolves around the dispersal of the subject (the writer, Orpheus), of the object (his artwork) and of the work's source (Eurydice). In the opening sentence of the section, we read: 'Quand Orphée descend vers Eurydice, l'art est la puissance par laquelle s'ouvre la nuit'.[33] Then, carried away by their encounter, and oblivious towards his work, namely to bring Eurydice back to the daylight, Orpheus looks at her, in her nocturnal darkness, while this look was forbidden. Therefore, writes Blanchot, 'trahit-il l'œuvre et Eurydice et la nuit'.[34] And yet, adds Blanchot, in support of Orpheus: 'si le monde juge Orphée, l'œuvre ne le juge pas. […] Regarder Eurydice, sans souci du chant, dans l'impatience et l'imprudence du désir qui oublie la loi, c'est cela même, *l'inspiration'*.[35] In rendering inspiration the focal point and mythical Orpheus the emblematic figure of the writer, Blanchot brings forth a literary paradigm, where writing tends not towards its end, towards its completion, towards the work as its result but, in an inverse movement, towards its starting point, its genesis, its source, its enabling (or rather disabling) condition. In Simon Critchley's astute remark, for Blanchot 'the goal of writing is not the work, the production of meaning and beauty. Writing is not the desire for the beautiful artwork; rather the writer writes out of a desire for the origin of the artwork'.[36]

[32] Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, 91.
[33] Blanchot, 'Le Regard d'Orphée', *L'Espace littéraire*, 225.
[34] Ibid. 226.
[35] Ibid. 228.
[36] Simon Critchley, *Very Little… Almost Nothing* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997, 2004), 44.

Yet, what is worth noting in Blanchot's account of the genesis of the artwork (and in its association with the fate of Orpheus), is that inspiration rather than an exaltation of creativity becomes that which ruins the work: the work consists of and emerges as the turning away and the silencing (rather than the expression) of inspiration and, conversely, inspiration is bound with worklessness (rather than with the work). In more explicit terms, the Blanchotian *quest* for the origin is a Levinasian-inspired attempt to break with ontology and thereby a *questioning* of the origin – a recasting of Heideggerian ontology in its aspiration for an original relation to Being, partly indebted to and echoing the relation between existence and existents as formulated by Levinas in *De l'existence à l'existent* (published in 1947). Leslie Hill has underlined how Blanchot's version of the genesis of the artwork parallels the Levinasian analysis of the emergence of the existent (the possibility of being in the world) from the impersonal anonymity of existence (the *il y a*).[37] The importance of conceiving the emergence of the artwork in such terms, that is, as the silencing and the intermittence of the work's source, lies in that emergence is recast as suspension and origin is recast as interruption (and therefore, not a beginning, a starting point, even less, a ground or a foundation). The artwork, rather than constitutive, gifted with the power to establish or enact, is turned into an interruption and what proves primary (namely, the artwork's source), is worklessness, darkness and anonymity, which both bring about the emergence of the work in the first place and, in its turn, suspend it. Therefore, Blanchot's recourse to the myth of Orpheus and his rereading of it as the artwork's longing for its source, does not simply expel origin to the realm of myth (thereby simply reinscribing origin as mythic), nor it is an attempt to rewrite and create the myth of literature (making use of and speculating on the gaps of myths). On the contrary, designating the origin of the artwork as diffused and dispersed, Blanchot puts forth literature as that which dismantles the very logic of origin.

Pronouncing Orpheus' gaze at what resists being looked at as the very experience and fate of literature, Blachot deciphers Eurydice's instant disappearance as what can neither be grasped nor renounced in the attempt at poetic retrieval. Therefore, the poem, and more broadly, the artwork, depends for its existence on something irretrievably lost, which can neither be incorporated nor disclosed, but which lies within it, as a ghostly presence, both doubling and separating it from itself. In this respect, despite Blanchot's complicity with Levinas, what Orpheus encounters in his descent is not, as Levinas would put it, the *visage* of Eurydice, in its

[37] Leslie Hill, *Blanchot. Extreme Contemporary* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), 115–6. Hill puts forward a reading of *L'Espace littéraire* as a recasting, via Levinas, of Heideggerian ontological difference.

radical alterity, in its irreducible otherness; all that he bears witness to is her becoming image. The realm of literature, as the realm of the imaginary, is an exposure to the invisibility within the visible rather than the sheer transcendence of otherness, as in Levinasian ethics (or, to put it another way, the rethinking of the other in terms of ethical transcendence).

In order to elaborate on and illuminate the Blanchotian literary paradigm in its centrifugal search for the origin, I want to bring in Georges Didi-Hubermann and his laudatory reading of the film 'Le Fils de Saoul', with the telling title *Sortir du noir*. Didi-Hubermann establishes a link between Saoul's desperate attempt in the Birkenau camp to salvage the body of a boy and Orpheus' descent towards Eurydice in Ades, the mythical space of death, as depicted by Blanchot. More precisely, Didi-Hubermann attributes to the madding undertaking of Saul a literary structure:

> cette folie avait une structure de conte : une structure d'objet mystérieux et, au fond, très littéraire. […] Comme Orphée, Saul se confronte à l'espace de la mort. Comme Orphée, il fait s'ouvrir la nuit, en vouant toute sa vie à sortir du noir un seul être aimé. Comme Orphée, il échouera dans son geste pourtant miraculeux.[38]

In the final lines of the text, we read: 'Toute l'autorité de Saoul – et, partant, de cette histoire, de ce film – tient à ce qu'il crée de toutes pièces, à contre-courant du monde et de sa cruauté, une situation dans laquelle *un enfant existe*, fût-il déjà mort'.[39] The authority of literature, the paradigm of literature, as espoused by Georges Didi-Hubermann and as put forth by Blanchot, lies in the fact that it occupies a tensional third space, lingering between being and not being, presence and absence, existence and non-existence. The Blanchotian experience of literature is close to the Derridean experience of the trace, which, against the authority of presence and the present (that is, against philosophy's preoccupation with the question of being – and the presupposition of presence and present that is bound with it), calls for a relation to something other than being, recasting the other as precisely what does not appear in terms of full presence.

This conception of the artwork in terms of an abiding duplicity is brought into even sharper focus in Blanchot's essay 'Le Chant des Sirènes. La rencontre de l'Imaginaire'. This essay reverses the long standing philosophical and aesthetic tradition according to which music is considered as accomplishing precisely what words always fail to realize: the absolute concordance between form and content, means and meaning. In the opening line of his essay,

[38] Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Sortir du noir* (Paris: Minuit, 2015), 40, 41.
[39] Ibid. 54–5 (italics in the text).

Blanchot attempts to rethink and revitalize the relationship of music and language, as – in his retelling of the encounter between Ulysses and the Sirens – he notes that the Sirens derive their power of seduction from singing, not in a splendid, but in a rather unsatisfactory way: 'Les Sirènes : il semble bien qu'elles chantaient, mais d'une manière qui ne satisfaisait pas, qui laissait seulement entendre dans quelle direction s'ouvraient les vraies sources et le vrai bonheur du chant'.[40] In Blanchot's view, Ulysses's encounter is what makes him become Homer and recount his tale about this extraordinary event. For Blanchot, it is the tale which is gifted with a world-disclosing power, as he puts it: 'le récit n'est pas la relation de l'événement mais cet événement même, l'approche de cet événement, le lieu où celui-ci est appelé à se produire, événement encore à venir et par la puissance attirante duquel le récit peut espérer, lui aussi, se réaliser'.[41] In this way, the Blanchotian notion of the *récit* appears as self-reflexive: it narrates itself, and thereby brings into being both itself and that which it is narrating (the event). The narration comes into being and, in doing so, it creates the event it narrates. And as the narration *is* (itself) the event, the event is yet to come and, as it comes, it brings narration into being. And yet, in this depiction of narration, not as an account of the event, distinct from it, but as bound to the event, unlike contemporary theories of performance and enactment, the event and (its) narration never fully merge, but elicit an asymptotic, an asymmetrical relationship. To put it another way, the fact that the narrated event is disentangled from the logic of representation does not amount to considering the narrative (in its capacity *as* an event, the event) in terms of enactment.

One cannot help but notice here that the narrated event, in Blanchot's analysis of the *récit*, is an encounter (firstly that of Ulysses with the Sirens and then that of Ahab with Moby Dick). Therefore, the encounter is both the theme of the *récit*, as the *récit* narrates an encounter, and the mode of being of the *récit,* as the *récit is* the encounter between itself and what it narrates. Yet, while the encounter narrated brings into being the *récit* and the encounter comes into being through its narration, these two encounters –rather than coincide– miss each other; rather than concurrent (existing at the same place, at the same time), they are incompatible and discordant. As Blanchot writes with regard to the unrealistic encounter of Ahab with Moby Dick in Mellville's novel:

> Il est bien vrai que c'est seulement dans le livre de Melville qu'Ahab rencontre Moby Dick ; il est bien vrai toutefois que cette rencontre permet seule à Melville d'écrire le

[40] Maurice Blanchot, 'La Rencontre de l'imaginaire' in *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 9.
[41] Ibid. 14.

> livre, rencontre si imposante, si démesurante et si particulière qu'elle […] paraît avoir lieu bien avant que le livre ne commence.[42]

The *récit* is different to itself, inasmuch as the reality described by it and the reality of the *récit* itself (its reality as *récit*), never fully coincide. In other words, the entwinement of the event – which is here an encounter, the encounter of Ahab and Moby Dick – and the narration, attests to a double origin: the encounter originates the narration (brings it into being) as much as the narration originates the encounter (makes it happen).[43]

In this sense, the mode of being of the *récit* (of literature) resembling itself but not fully identical to itself, is synonymous with the mode of being of beings, as sketched above. And if, for reasons of methodological clarity, I started my chapter with 'being' (as not being, as double) to end up with literature (in its duplicity), for Blanchot it is through the latter that we are exposed to the former; in other words, it is the experience of literature that exposes us to the abiding duplicity of being. The theme of duplicity will be in detail explored in Part III of thesis, where our discussion will focus on doubling and masking. For now, I want to underline that being, in its duplicity and doubleness as brought forth by the image, is equivocal, non-self-identical and, thereby, dispersed and dis-originated with regard to its unity or any possibility of totality. Thus, literature and art, defined as the realm of images, partake of an ontological density, inasmuch as they themselves are precisely an image without an original. In the work of art the so called 'represented' object is always absent and the material elements, which make the artwork – whether a painting's strokes or a novel's words – neither re-present, nor disclose what they depict, but rather present it, pointing precisely towards its absence.

Our discussion, drawing on Maurice Blanchot's key notions of the image, imagination, the event, the outside and distance, reconsiders – among other things – the definition of literature as a temporal art (which narrates events, contemplates on time and memory) and, subsequently, its opposition to spatial arts such as painting and sculpture. Moreover, our analysis emphasizes how literature's account of space (the space of literature,) destabilizes the recurring dichotomies of here and nowhere, inside and outside, intimacy and distance, the visible and the invisible, what is and what is not, the real and the imaginary. In *L'Espace littéraire*, Blanchot

[42] Ibid. 15.

[43] In opposition to Todorov, according to whom the fantastic revolves around a hesitation regarding the *nature* of an uncanny event, which is subsequently resolved, as the event is acknowledged as reality or as imaginary (imaginary meaning here illusory), as it is decided whether the event 'is' or 'is not', the Blanchotian paradigm of inspiration focuses on the *origination* of the event, lingers over the undecidability of its origin and finally renders this undecidability unresolved, designating it precisely as the space of literature.

alludes to Rodin's *Balzac,* an artwork that exemplifies the alliance of literature – personified in the figure of Balzac – and art – condensed in Rodin's sculpture and writes that, in opposition to *The Kiss,* that allows itself to be gazed at, the *Balzac* is not gazed upon. As Blanchot writes, '*le Baiser* de Rodin se laisse regarder et même se plaît à l'être, le Balzac est sans regard, chose fermée et dormante, absorbée en elle-même jusqu'à disparaître'.[44] Blanchot's tribute to art, via Rodin's tribute to literature, epitomises what art and literature attain and offer us, what art and literature *are* for creators and writers, viewers and readers: presences not withheld but given in their withdrawal.

The space of literature – literature as space, the slot that literature strives for – can be resumed in terms of a change in focus, as a movement from 'what is' towards 'what is *not*' and, thereby, as a reconfiguration of existence in terms of invisibility and obscurity. The significance of *L'Espace littéraire* lies precisely, one can argue, in dissociating existence from presence and visibility and in considering spacing – making space for (the obscure and the invisible) – synonymous with the gesture – and the ethics – of writing. In it, literature is designated as a third space: neither that of death, as in Hegelian dialectics, nor that of eternal life, since Eurydice is not retrieved from the underworld but is lost twice. Additionally, literature recasts the key measure of space, namely distance, since distance – and more particularly that of reality and the image – is no longer conceived in terms of *from*/*between* but in terms of *within*. In what follows, another reconfiguration of existence and another approach of the ethical will be examined, which consist in the dissociation of existence from teleology. In this respect, our spatial analysis of the Blanchotian image as the absenting of presence will be complemented by a temporal analysis of the Bataillean instant as the absenting of the present. To do so, we now turn to Bataille's *La Littérature et le mal*, where time (rather than space) is the central preoccupation, 'what is' becomes disconnected from 'what it is *for*' and existence is reconfigured as gratuitous. In the disentanglement of the present from the hegemony of the future, existence (be it human or that of literature) comes forward freed from justification and redemption, yet bound to itself and to irredeemable loss.

[44] Blanchot, 'Lire', *L'Espace littéraire,* 253.

Chapter 5
The instant: the ethics of literature

Je dirais volontiers que ce dont je suis le plus fier, c'est d'avoir brouillé les cartes… c'est-à-dire d'avoir associé la façon de rire la plus turbulente et la plus choquante, la plus scandaleuse, avec l'esprit religieux le plus profond
(Georges Bataille, Madeleine Chapsal, *Les écrivains en personne*)

In *Giving an Account of Oneself,* Judith Butler argues that the inability of the subject to give a coherent and complete account of herself does not preclude ethical responsibility. As she puts it: 'Perhaps most importantly, we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, […] when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human'.[45] Pleading for the necessity of dispossession, the need to undress and undo the self-sufficient 'I', she goes on:

> To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance – to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient 'I' as a kind of possession.[46]

Butler concludes by emphatically reasserting that a postulation of a divided, ungrounded and incoherent subject, of what she repeatedly calls 'an opaque subject', can serve and support a theory of ethics and responsibility: 'If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will be forgiven'.[47]

Confronting the problem of (self)identity, Butler's study rethinks the self as always already implicated with and interrupted by something outside itself, be it – from a Levinasian standpoint – the exorbitant call made by the Other, or – from a Foucauldian standpoint – our embeddedness within prior social structures. Similarly, giving an account of oneself, as her title promises, implicates and exposes the scene of address: the account necessitates and implies a structure of relationality, another to whom I give the account of myself. For Butler, it is due to its fundamental, essential, constitutive relationality that the self, rather than transparent, is opaque. Therefore, determined to work out a theory of ethics that is rooted in the reality of human existence, Butler unravels her thesis as follows:

[45] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 136.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

> if it is precisely by virtue of its relations to others that it is opaque to itself, and if those relations to others are precisely the venue for its ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it sustains some of its most important ethical bond.[48]

Butler's undertaking to recast the ethical subject resonates with the ethical experience as framed by Levinas. Simon Critchley observes that the Levinasian contribution to, and disruption, of ethics, and more precisely, Kantian ethics, lies in that the ethical is no longer linked to the subject's autonomy; on the contrary, the ethical consists of, precisely, calling the subject's autonomy into question: 'the Levinasian subject is constituted though an act of approval to a demand to which it is fundamentally inadequate'.[49] For Levinas, it is the radical alterity of the demand, or, to use his terms, the face of the other, that engenders the split within the self and gives rise to the subject as split. Yet, for Critchley, or rather in Critchley's reading of Levinas, there is a disposition towards alterity located, always already, at the heart of the self that enables its relation to the other as other: 'I am an existential exaggeration', 'there is something at the heart of me, that arguably makes me the "me" that I am, but which is quite opaque to me'.[50] Reading Levinas against Levinas, or rather reversing the order preferred by Levinas and by Butler, Critchley posits the split subject (the otherness within) as the precondition for an ethical relation to the other and, thereby, ties ethics to a theory of the subject.

At the core of both Butler's as well as Critchley's thinking is the Levinasian critique of the Hegelian notion of a master-subject. In *Subjects of Desire*, Butler brings into question the totalizing and teleological aspects of Hegel's philosophy, or more precisely, of a certain reception of it. Following Kojève's reading, and thereby shifting her emphasis from ending, totality, conceptual domination towards break, interruption and loss, she aims to show how the Hegelian vision can be 'less totalizing than presumed' and the subject of mastery less whole and self-same than foreseen.[51] Similarly, and more emphatically, in *Le Temps et l'autre* Levinas stages a progressive journey in direct contrast with that of Hegelian phenomenology.[52] The Levinasian diagram of existence advances not towards totality and complete

[48] Judith Butler, 'Giving an Account of Oneself' in *Diacritics* 31:4, Winter 2001, 22–40 (22).
[49] Simon Critchley, 'The Split Subject – The Infinitely Demanding Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas', https://www.cavehill.uwi.edu/fhe/histphil/chips/archives/2005/docs/critchley.aspx, 2, 3.
[50] Ibid. 6.
[51] Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire. Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), xx.
[52] Emmanuel Levinas, *Le Temps et l'autre* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1979).

comprehension, but towards alterity and the wholly other, rendering the subject's encounter with the irreducible mystery and the otherness of the other person its culminating moment. As Richard Cohen remarks in his introduction, comparing and contrasting Levinas to Hegel: 'the end in Levinas is neither an end, a finality, nor a truth, a comprehension. Levinas' thought ends with what has no end: alterity, the infinite, the wholly other'.[53] Additionally, as Cohen demonstrates, it is not just the endings of Hegel and Levinas that are different, but also their yearnings: while Hegelian phenomenology is driven by a desire for the total truth, Levinasian phenomenology 'is driven by a desire for an exteriority which remains irreducible exterior'.[54]

Echoing the Levinasian craving for exteriority, Georges Bataille in *Sur Nietzsch*e announces: 'les êtres, les hommes, ne peuvent « communiquer » – *vivre* – que hors d'eux-mêmes'.[55] Bataille has thoroughly and persistently molded the subject in terms of excess, in terms of an 'existential exaggeration', to use the words of Critchley. Bataille privileges moments of unknowingness, moments of 'anguish' and 'risk', when the 'self-sufficient I' is 'undone', to repeat the terminology of Judith Butler, since in them precisely the subject is given the chance to encounter itself. These links and comparisons do not aspire to suggest that Bataille can be considered as a thinker concerned with ethical responsibility in the way that Levinas or Butler are. Besides, the (non)relation to others is not a central concern in Bataille's thought and on many occasions he puts forward irresponsibility and carelessness over responsibility and care. Yet, drawing on both Butler's and Critchley's remark that a theory of ethics is interrelated with a theory of the subject, and on Critchley's view of the opaque, split subject as the precondition of the subject's capacity to ethically relate to the other, I make the minimum claim that Bataille's thought is relevant to ethics inasmuch as it persistently unveils the subject as exposed to something other, outside itself, and insofar as it takes good and evil as its theme(s).

La Littérature et le mal (published in 1957), Bataille's collection of essays devoted to literature, directly addresses, as the book's title testifies, the question of evil. Drawing on a series of writers of the modern literary tradition, Bataille demonstrates how evil becomes a privileged trope for ethical renewal against the stiffness of modern life.[56] Following – and at the same time going against– the literary tradition of modernity, Bataille renders evil synonymous with

[53] Richard Cohen, 'Introduction' in Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, transl. Richard Cohen, 2.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Georges Bataille, *Sur Nietzsche*, *OC VI*, 48 (emphasis in the original).
[56] Damian Cattani has convincingly demonstrated the complex relationship between modernity, evil and ethics in 'Modernity, Evil and Ethics: a Sartrean and Bataillean Reading of Baudelaire's "Le Jeu"', in *Dix-Neuf,* 16 (3), 2012, 260–70.

an intense experience, which is overall lacking in a world guided by the values of progress and rationality. Yet, unlike the modernist tradition, evil for Bataille does not confer or add another – in contrast to the predominant – significance to life; it consists precisely of voiding, releasing and unconfining life from significance. As Critchley notes, modernity is post-religious but not post-metaphysical, since it still believes in – and fosters – values and certainties, what Nietzsche denominates and denunciates as 'the big words'[57] (reason, equality and freedom, happiness, love, or even 'damnation as a form of immediate salvation').[58] Allying himself with Nietzsche, Bataille recasts evil as merely a moment of living, which comes about due to the sheer abruptness of life. In this respect, Bataillean evil bears the resonance of and corresponds to the Nietzschean eternal return, namely 'existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness'.[59] Nietzsche's understanding of being as becoming and of reality as a continual flow, as well as his corresponding recasting of temporality in terms of flux, fluctuation and tension, rather than succession, informs and anticipates the Bataillean inversion of teleological thinking.

In *La Littérature et le mal*, the Bataillean contrivance of evil addresses the Nietzschean challenge to reconfigure and endure 'existence as it is', that is, as inevitably recurring. By means of the trope of 'evil', the *telos* (the futurism and aim) of human existence is challenged and knocked down. Surya sketches the Bataillean reordering of morals as follows: 'le mal appartient au sommet, le bien au déclin'.[60] More importantly, in this new topography, where good and evil are changing places, good becomes evil and evil becomes good. Or rather, to borrow the phrasing of Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, evil becomes 'sovereignly good, because good for nothing'.[61] The moral of the summit, the hyper-moral, is designated by Bataille as 'sovereign', inasmuch as it is 'not subjected, subordinated, subjugated to anything'.[62] In this respect, as Borch-Jacobsen observes, Bataille radicalizes Nietzschean superiority, height and nobility, since he equates them with the filthiest baseness. Bataillean sovereignty is 'existence for itself', 'valid in itself', serving no purpose, nothing.[63]

[57] Critchley, *Very Little … Amost Nothing*, 11.
[58] T.S. Eliot, as quoted by Catani, 'Modernity, Evil and Ethics', 263.
[59] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, transl. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, 1967), 35.
[60] Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille. la mort à l'œuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992, 2012), 491.
[61] Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, 'The Laughter of Being', *Bataille: A Critical reader*, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 146–66 (153).
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.

Simon Critchley, criticising the moral claims of liberal democracies as deficient inasmuch as they are 'externally compulsory, but not internally compelling', recalls Yeats' line in his poem 'The Second Coming', written in the aftermath of the First World War: 'the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity'.[64] While for Critchley and his politics of resistance the aim is to fill the best with passionate intensity, according to Bataille's tragic outlook, passionate intensity is recast as the best. In other words, Bataille's rearrangement of morality consists of a temporal rearrangement: it is the existential priority of the present over the future, the privileging of the intensity of the present over future planning, duration and survival. For Bataille, evil consists of the existential priority of the present, that is, the focalization of existence on itself and its refusal to be subordinated to a telos, a future goal, a principle. Again, the Nietzschean resonances of the Bataillean endeavour are sensed: breaking with the philosophical tradition from Plato to Kant and its quest for truth, Nietzsche's major concern is life and all that is life-enhancing. Additionally, breaking with the Aristotelian tradition of *eudaimonia* (and its recuperation by Bentham's utilitarianism), Nietzsche calls us to live not happy, but tragic lives. And yet, Bataille's insistence on evil differs from Nietzsche's skeptical attack on the concept and his advocacy to move *beyond* judgements of good and evil. Bataille asserts the necessity of evil for the same reasons for which Nietzsche advocates its dismissal: while for the latter the concept of evil is life-denying, an invention of the powerless and weak due to their *ressentiment* towards the creative and vital forces of life, for the former evil is valued as an essential condition of life, precisely because it corresponds to the irreducible, sovereign part of ourselves that challenges the law of reason. As Bataille notes, 'le Mal […] est aussi [...] d'une manière ambiguë, un fondement de l'être. L'être n'est pas voué au Mal, mais il doit, s'il peut, ne pas se laisser enfermer dans les limites de la raison'.[65] And elsewhere, we read 'il y a une volonté de rupture avec le monde, pour mieux étreindre la vie dans sa plénitude et découvrir dans la création artistique ce que la réalité refuse'.[66] It is in its defiance of reason and in the desire to break with the world as it is that evil becomes glorified for Bataille.

Evil and literature

In *La Littérature et le mal* the seemingly paradoxical relation between evil and ethics is attested. In this regard, the irreducible, residual part within the subject that defies unity, coherence and

[64] Critchley, 'The Split Subject…', 1.
[65] Georges Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, *OC IX* 186.
[66] Jacques Blondel as quoted by Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 180.

understanding (the opaqueness to which both Critchley and Butler allude as the basis of ethical connection) is designated by Bataille as evil. In his commentary on *La Littérature et le Mal*, Denis Hollier observes that evil corresponds to the moment when the wilful subject becomes helpless, vulnerable and thereby, instead of imposing its will, yields to something that is not its choice. This turning point, when the subject's autonomy is compromised, is described by Hollier as follows:

> when, after having unconditionally desired the Good, the will arrives at the extreme point where it can no longer want [...] and nevertheless remains unsatisfied, […] notices that there is a residue before which it remains helpless, a residue which has total power over it since the will becomes so vulnerable that it can only yield [...] [to what] in wanting, it did not want.[67]

Bataille's vision of evil, as sketched above, can be compared, in its idiosyncrasy, with the Kantian account on the matter to the extent that both focus on the structure, the mode of the act as such. Bataille, like Kant, does not refer to the content of the act nor address its harmful consequences. Unlike Kant, and his equation of evil with a will that is not fully good (Kantian evil consists in not acting out of principle), Bataillean evil is not considered in relation to the will but in relation to time, more precisely in relation to the moment in time when the will is suspended and silenced (Bataillean evil consists of the displacement of action by passion).

Bataille appends evil to the field of literature, as the conjunction 'and' (et) of his title *La Littérature et le mal* makes evident. In doing so, he assigns to literature the deciphering of evil. Juxtaposing the moral virtuousness and the sheltered life of Emily Brontë to her exposure to the very depths of evil as attested in the writing of *Wuthering Heights*, he remarks, 'mais sa pureté morale intacte, elle [Emily Brontë] eut de l'abîme du Mal une expérience profonde. […] Ce fut la tâche de la littérature, de l'imagination, du rêve'.[68] Similarly, the double relationship of evil, on the one hand with literature, on the other hand with an ethical stance, is announced in the preface of Bataille's book: 'La littérature est l'essentiel, ou n'est rien. Le Mal – une forme aiguë du Mal – dont elle est l'expression, a pour nous, je le crois, une valeur souveraine. Mais cette conception ne commande pas l'absence de morale, elle exige une « hypermorale »'.[69] Joseph Libertson underlines how the Bataillean terms communicate, or become contaminated by one another, and how this act of interchange is an essential part of 'the process

[67] Denis Hollier, 'The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille' in *Bataille. A Critical Reader*, 59–73 (64).
[68] Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 173.
[69] Bataille, 'Avant-Propos', *La Littérature et le mal*, 171.

of their definition'.[70] It is precisely this complex relationship between these three key terms – literature, evil, and hypermorality – as well as the redefinition of each term, due to its interplay with the others, that this chapter seeks to explore. For now, I want to note that the 'hypermorality' put forth in *La Littérature et le mal* correlates with the distinction between morality and ethics and has common qualities with the latter. According to the distinction, drawn most notably by Foucault and Deleuze, and bearing the mark of the Nietzschean transvaluation of values, morality posits a transcendental aspect and is meant as a set of rules against which a person's actions are evaluated, while ethics bears an element of immanence and corresponds to a mode of existence, a way of life.[71] For Bataille, as already mentioned, this way of life involves the primacy of the present. Additionally, given the implication of literature, one can go even further and suggest that hypermorality moves beyond the ethical and towards the aesthetic. As Todd May has argued with reference to Foucault, the ethical connotes that there is a right way, or several right ways, of living, while the aesthetic strives to bring into being a life, new and different, 'worthy of being lived'.[72] For May, the ethical slides towards the aesthetic when the question 'How ought we live?' is replaced by the question 'How might we live?' and when life frees itself from principles and creates itself, becoming itself, as Foucault yearned for, a work of art.[73]

What is crucial and singular in the Bataillean re-examination of the question of evil is its framing in relation to modern literature. As Michel Surya notes, while the theme of evil – and (im)morality – is omnipresent in Bataille's texts, a systematic account of it was for a long time absent. As Surya observes, with regard to the late writing of *La Littérature et le mal*: 'ce qu'il ne lui est sans doute pas possible de dire en philosophe, il le dira en écrivain, en écrivain fasciné par d'autres écrivains'.[74] As a step towards highlighting and anticipating the complexity and subtlety of Bataille's thinking on the matter, I want to bring in Simone Weil's *La Pesanteur et la grâce,* which was published in 1947, ten years before *La Littérature et le mal*. In the section labeled 'Le Mal', and more precisely in the fragment under the title 'Littérature et morale', Weil praises both imaginary evil (as opposed to real evil) and real good (as opposed to

[70] Joseph Libertson, 'Proximity and the Word: Blanchot and Bataille', *Substance* n°14, 1976, 35– 49 (36).
[71] For the distinction and its relationship with the philosophy of the ancient world and more particularly with Stoicism, see John Sellars,' An Ethics of the Event. Deleuze's Stoicism', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 11:3, 2006, 157–71 (166).
[72] Todd May, 'Michel Foucault's Guide to Living', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 11:3, 2006, 173–84 (176–77).
[73] 'But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not life?', Foucault as quoted by May 'Michel Foucault's Guide to Living', 176.
[74] Surya, *Georges Bataille*, 498.

imaginary good): 'Le mal imaginaire est romantique, varié, le mal réel morne, monotone, désertique, ennuyeux. Le bien imaginaire est ennuyeux ; le bien réel est toujours nouveau, merveilleux, enivrant'.[75] Consequently, she evaluates literature (the field of the imaginary) as either boring, when it picks good as its subject matter, or immoral, when it makes the choice to contemplate on evil: 'Donc la « littérature d'imagination » est ou ennuyeuse ou immorale (ou un mélange des deux). Elle n'échappe à cette alternative qu'en passant en quelque sorte, à force d'art du côté de la réalité – ce que le génie seul peut faire'.[76] As Weil seems to suggest, imaginary evil, that is, evil depicted in literature, has the adeptness, rather than being immoral, to pass over to the side of real good. Drawing on her insight, I will argue that Bataille's *Littérature et le mal* ventures precisely into this artful crossover of literary evil towards the side of good. In this sense, Bataille's position towards evil proves to be more complex, tensional and ambiguous than it appears at first glance; rather than as an apologist of evil, he fluctuates between the fascination of evil and the dream of good, inclining towards darkness and nonetheless astonished with light. Indeed, pronouncing his admiration for *Wuthering Heights*, he observes: 'La fin du très sombre récit d'Emily Brontë est la brusque apparition d'un rayon de tendre lumière'.[77] Similarly, in a more confessional tone, commenting on his own disposition, he writes: 'n'étant pas plus moral qu'un autre, ayant même en cette matière toujours subi l'attrait du mal, j'ai dû comprendre néanmoins de bonne heure que l'attrait du bien me dominait'.[78] In what follows, my task will be to examine writing as a privileged occasion for the articulation of the topic of evil. In this attempt, I suggest reversing the order preferred by Bataille; in my inquiry, evil will come first and literature second: thus, evil and literature, rather than, as Bataille opted for, literature and evil. Inverting the terms in question, I will first explore the notion of evil as recast by Bataille and then examine what the domain of literature contributes (adds) to the problematic of evil. In other words, to what extent does evil require literature in order to think about itself? By way of an answer, I want to note that *La Littérature et le mal* brings about a shift in emphasis with regard to Bataille's pre-war and post-war engagements, which can be somewhat signaled in terms of a shift in emphasis from the real to the literary: while the Bataille of *Documents*, and to a certain extent the Bataille of *L'Expérience intérieure*, adopts the standpoint of the real (that is, materiality and experience) and revolts against aestheticism, idealization and the life of the spirit (namely, the Surrealists

[75] Simon Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1947, 1988), 83.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 186.
[78] Georges Bataille, 'La Souveraineté', *OC VIII*, 637.

and Hegel), the Bataille of *La Littérature et le mal* adopts the standpoint of literature (that is, non-productive activity) and revolts against effective action (namely, Sartre).

Before exploring the Bataillean recasting of evil as put forth in *La Littérature et le mal*, I will touch upon Bataille's fascination with evil in its common and broad signification as wrongdoing and suffering. 'Le mal est toujours pire', notes Denis Hollier, and he goes on by marking out 'le pire' as an absolute comparative ('ce comparatif absolu'), inasmuch as what is worse can always get (even) worse.[79] Evil is a challenge to limits to the extent that the question of evil converges with the question of limits (discursive, subjective and ethical, limits of thought, of consciousness and of morality); thereby it grows into a privileged trope for Bataille, who lived on the edge, constantly pushed the boundaries of possibility and whose thinking – and life – was devoted to – and troubled by – the extreme. Crime and suffering, more specifically 'pure' crime and suffering, as Denis Hollier would add, are provocative inasmuch as they defy reason, in the double sense that they are without justification (motivation or purpose) and are beyond comprehension (threatening our ability to make sense).[80] And yet, one might object, if evil is considered synonymous with the unintelligible, it runs the danger of being reduced to a useless concept. If the word 'evil' is used to provide the missing explanation, when we lack a complete explanation, it might turn out to be, as Terry Eagleton remarks, 'a way of bringing arguments to an end', in a similar manner to the idea of taste.[81]

Bataille, of course, whose distaste for endings is widely known, does not appeal to the contrivance of evil in order to put an end to the debate, but rather in order to re-open it. In post-war France, at the time when several of the essays that make up *La Littérature et le mal* were written, the depths of horror have entered history. Bataille is therefore urged to rethink some recurring themes of his writings (the desire for annihilation, expenditure, death), as well as respond to (and take responsibility for) the historical occurrence of radical evil. This response consists of an awakening to the possibility of evil. In his review of *Les jours de notre mort*, Rousset's novel on the universe of the concentration camps, Bataille renders humankind as a whole, himself and us, in charge of the question of evil by signalling:

> Nous ne pouvons pas être *humains* sans avoir aperçu en nous la possibilité de la souffrance, celle aussi de l'abjection. Mais nous ne sommes pas seulement les victimes

[79] Denis Hollier, 'La Tragédie de Gilles de Rais', *L'Arc* 32, 1967, 63–70 (64).
[80] Hollier, 'La Tragédie de Gilles de Rais', 64. On the case of Gilles de Rais, Hollier remarks: 'Sans la nudité de ses aveux étrangers à toute explication Gilles de Rais n'aurait pas été le « pur » criminel. En dernière instance, son crime, c'est de n'avoir aucune raison'.
[81] Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2010), 8.

> possibles des bourreaux : les bourreaux sont nos semblables. Il nous faut encore nous interroger : n'y a-t-il rien dans notre nature qui rende tant d'horreur impossible? et nous devons bien nous répondre : en effet, rien. Mille obstacles en nous s'y opposent… Ce n'est pas impossible néanmoins.[82]

In this respect, Surya astutely notes that Bataille re-evaluates good as the *awakening* to evil, an awakening which (consisting of the consciousness of the *possibility* for abjection and suffering) is starkly distinct from the realization, the actual *doing* of evil.[83] Besides denoting that the very notion and existence of good implicates a contemplation of, an awakening to and a responsibility for evil, the significance of the above passage lies in the fact that Bataille, rather than establishing a link between the two forms of evil, suffering and abjection, adds the latter to the former; correspondingly, rather than opposing sufferers and wrongdoers, victims and executioners, he places them side by side. In doing so, he strives to put forward, against the prevailing dualism with reference to the two categories of evil, a broken dialectic.

The act of linking abjection, wrong, on the one hand, and suffering, misfortune, on the other, is old but persistent: it can be traced from Augustine's theological account of the Fall, where affliction (natural evil) is logically connected to -and hence morally justified due to – man's original sin (moral evil) – a linkage that has nevertheless been shaken since the Lisbon earthquake- until the secular perspective within our current legal system, which associates crime with punishment. Indeed, in his commentary on Nietzsche's *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Derrida wonders:

> d'où vient cette idée bizarre, bizarre, cette idée antique, archaïque (*uralte*), cette idée si profondément enracinée, peut-être indestructible, d'une équivalence possible entre le dommage et la douleur (*Schaden und Schmetz*). D'où vient cette étrange hypothèse ou présomption d'une équivalence de deux choses si incommensurables ? Qu'est-ce qu'un tort et une souffrance peuvent avoir en commun ?[84]

In an attempt to cast light upon the penitentiary logic which permeates our legal system, Derrida, following Nietzsche, traces it back to the law of commerce and exchange ('la réponse de Nietzsche consiste alors à chercher l'origine de cette incroyable équivalence […] dans le

[82] Georges Bataille, 'Réflections sur le bourreau et le victime', *OC XI*, 266.
[83] Surya, *Georges Bataille*, 496.
[84] Jacques Derrida, *Séminaire. La peine de mort I (1999-2000)* (Paris: Galilée, 2012), 217

commerce, dans l'échange, dans la vente, le trafic, etc').[85] As he remarks, commenting on the genesis and the geneology of the legal system: 'l'origine du sujet de droit et notamment du droit pénal, c'est le droit commercial, c'est la loi du commerce, de la dette, du marché, de l'échange entre les choses, des corps et des signes monétaires'.[86] To emphasise this, in her reading of both Derrida and Nietzsche, Judith Butler insinuates the etymological coupling between counting (time and money), on one side, and accountability, being counted on (to count time and money), on the other side. The alliance between criminality and punishment is based on the creditor-debtor relation, inasmuch as injury is considered a debt and punishment a repayment (literally, the price to be paid). Therefore, as Butler concludes, 'the field of suffering is pervasively economized, and the contract becomes the salient model for human exchange'.[87] In what follows, I will attempt to show how Bataille disturbs the balance, the logic of equivalence and exchange, which has reigned over the debate on evil, by inaugurating a logic of incommensurability, not only between the two forms of evil (suffering and wrongdoing) but also, and more crucially, between evil and good. This logic of incommensurability of the broken dialectic sets in motion the repetitive temporality of the Nietzschean eternal recurrence against the linear temporality of the working dialectic (the Kojèvian/Hegelian master and slave dialectic).

Bataille approaches the question of the source of evil by taking human freedom as his point of departure. In the context of freedom, Bataille inaugurates a new distinction concerning evil: an acute, asocial form of evil (upheld and celebrated in literature) and the social, political form of evil (that enters history). Thus in *La Littérature et le mal*, advancing two starkly different categories of evil, Bataille sets apart literary evil, that is, evil in its intimacy with modern literature (evil as a momentary expenditure, pure passion) from the historical and political occurrences of evil (evil as a relentless edifice of power, passion rendered servile in the service of power): '[...] le Mal envisagé sous le jour d'une attirance désintéressée vers la mort, diffère du mal dont le sens est l'intérêt égoïste'.[88] To better understand Bataille's division, we might compare (or more precisely contrast) his modelling of an acute form of evil with Pasolini's film *Salo*, which draws precisely on, unveils and denounces the appropriation of passion by

[85] Ibid. In her review of the English translation of Derrida's book Judith Butler reminds us of Nietzsche's formulation 'festive cruelty', which in his view is to be found in both the domain of law and of morality. Judith Butler, '"On Cruelty". *The Death Penalty, Vol. I*, by Jacques Derrida, transl. Peggy Kamuf', *London Review of Books,* 36:14 (17 July 2014), 31–3 (31).
[86] Derrida, *Séminaire. La peine de mort I*, 217.
[87] Butler, 'On Cruelty', 31
[88] Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 187.

legal and political power. The film, which appeared in 1975 and whose complete title is *Salò, or the 120 days of Sodom*, transposes Sade's eighteenth-century novel of enjoyment and pain, torment and humiliation in 1944 to the Italian town of Salo that served as the capital of the Fascist Republic. The film focuses on the subjection of nine teenagers to 120 days of torture (physical, mental and sexual) at the hands of four corrupt fascist libertines. Commenting on his adaptation of the novel, Pasolini remarks that in his film sex becomes 'an allegory of the commodification of bodies at the hands of power'.[89]

Evil and time

In *La Littérature et le mal* Bataille breaks with and moves beyond the prevailing philosophical traditions on Good and evil, namely both the Neo-platonic logic, which considers evil as derivative, as a degraded form of Good, as well as the logic of opposites, which regards good and evil as antithetical and therefore as equivalent. Bataille's clash with Sartre brings into focus precisely these enduringly established philosophic postulates. Sartre, in his commentary on Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, mistrusts evil and discredits it as self-defeating. In Sartre's view, as quoted by Bataille: '« [...] mais la création délibérée du Mal, c'est-à-dire la faute, est acceptance et reconnaissance du Bien ; elle lui rend hommage et, en se baptisant elle-même mauvaise, elle avoue qu'elle est relative et dérivée, que sans le Bien, elle n'existerait pas »'.[90] Against this oppositional logic, Bataille introduces a logic of asymmetry and essential otherness, since, as he writes in the section of *La Littérature et le mal* dedicated to Proust, 'si le Bien et le Mal sont complémentaires, il n'en résulte pas d'équivalence'.[91] To better understand the above passage, I want to bring in Simone Weil's vision of a 'higher good', which concords and resonates with Bataille's demand of a 'hypermorality'. Weil's visualization of a higher good is entirely incompatible with evil as well as with what she calls 'degraded good', that is, a low form of good, the good of the penal code, order: 'le bien comme contraire du mal lui est équivalent en un sens comme tous les contraires'.[92] And she goes on to provide a list of opposites that could have been in the same way enumerated by Bataille (or by Foucault, in his critical review of Bataillean transgression), such as 'vol et respect bourgeois de la propriété, adultère et « honnête femme » ; caisse d'épargne et gaspillage ; mensonge et « sincérité »'.[93]

[89] Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'The Lost Interview': https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/the-lost-pasolini-interview.
[90] Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 190.
[91] Ibid. 268.
[92] Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, 84.
[93] Ibid. 85.

Against this oppositional and symmetrical logic, in each of the essays that make up *La Littérature et le Mal*, we find a variant of the main motif of evil as the predominance of the intensity of the instant, which challenges the path of reason, the calculations of interest and the will of survival and duration (all that which common morality designates as Good). In the case of Emily Brontë, or rather in the character of Heathcliff, evil becomes synonymous with childhood, as crystallised in Heathcliff's frenzied attempt to regain his kingdom of childhood and concurrently his love for Catherine that is bound – and irretrievably lost – with it. In this sense, evil, as personified by Heathcliff, is circumscribed as the infantile preference for the present moment, while Good assumes the form of consideration of the future, a concern that dominates the world of adults. Bataille's disagreement with Sartre unfolds around the key figure of Baudelaire, who, in both Sartre's and Bataille's view, refuses to assume responsibility for his freedom, denying the existing order while simultaneously sustaining and affirming it ('Baudelaire [...], délibérément, refuse d'agir en homme accompli, c'est-à-dire en homme prosaïque. Sartre a raison : Baudelaire a choisi d'être en faute, comme un enfant').[94] Two versions of freedom thus emerge: Sartre views freedom as synonymous with human consciousness and, therefore, in terms of temporality, as future oriented (to the degree that consciousness is necessarily future oriented). In *L'Être et le néant* human freedom consists in the ability of consciousness to transcend its material situation, in the ability of consciousness to deny and escape the present. Bataille, on the other hand, considers freedom as correlated not with consciousness, but with the fascination of evil and, in terms of temporality, as tied to an overwhelming, immersing and simultaneously receding, present. Throughout *La Littérature et le Mal* he insists on the reciprocal relation of evil and freedom, on the fact that evil and freedom are reciprocally constituted. Defining the freedom to go wrong, to disobey the Law as inherently human, he notes: 'La liberté n'est-elle pas le pouvoir qui manque à Dieu, ou qu'il n'a que verbalement, puisqu'il ne peut désobéir l'ordre qu'*il est*, dont il est garant?'.[95] Since God is dead and adulthood is assigned the task of acting as the guarantor of order, freedom for Bataille belongs to childhood, as he puts it, 'la liberté serait à la rigueur un pouvoir de l'enfant : elle ne serait plus pour l'adulte engagé dans l'ordonnance obligatoire de l'action qu'un rêve, un désir, une hantise'.[96]

While Sartre's liberating, dialectical view subscribes freedom (meant as empowerment) to the realm of the possible, the realizable and action, in Bataille's tragic view freedom (meant as

[94] Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 192.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid. 191–2.

powerlessness) is baptized 'sovereignty' and is bound to the realm of the impossible, the unrealizable, passion and failure. As Bataille notes, with reference to Genet: 'la souveraineté n'a pour elle que le royaume de l'échec'; 'jamais nous ne pouvons *être* souverain'.[97] Against the Sartrean prospect of freedom, Bataille posits the attraction of freedom, freedom as an attraction. As Edward Greenwood points out, Bataillean sovereignty does not come to light as the happy end, the successful accomplishment of a progressing linear process, but bursts forth, repetitively, as an experience of failure, as he remarks, 'the story that Bataille tells about man's hunger for sovereignty has no happy ending. It is the tale of a repeated experience of failure'.[98] In this respect, the sovereign attitude is defined by Bataille as synonymous with 'l'*attitude mineure*', 'une attitude d'enfant', 'un jeu gratuit'.[99]

Bataille's insistence on associating freedom with the plane of the present (an insistence that almost entraps freedom into the present), further coupled with the linkage between freedom, the present and childhood, echoes the doubt of Ivan in the *Karamazovs* as expressed around the key figure of the child (the cost of a single tear, from a single child). Ivan's speech, cited and embraced by Simone Weil, goes as follows: '« Quand même cette immense fabrique apporterait les plus extraordinaires merveilles et ne coûterait qu'une seule larme d'un seul enfant, moi je refuse »'.[100] The figure of the child displays the ethical priority of the here and now; or rather, the reason for which the here and now is endowed with ethical underpinnings is manifest in the figure of the child. This means that the presence of the child, here and now, whether tearful, as in Ivan's speech, or savagely joyful, as Heathcliff in Bronte's novel, manifests what is miscalculated in the calculation of the future, what cannot and should not be overcome, annulled in its contingency, in and for the prospect of extraordinary marvels. In this sense, what Bataille says of Baudelaire is also true for himself; for Bataille as well: 'la négation du bien [...] est d'une façon fondamentale la négation du primat du lendemain', namely a denial of teleology. [101]

As a step towards understanding the correlation between freedom and evil and the temporality that goes along with it in Bataille's thinking, we might compare it with the reasoning of Paul Ricœur on the matter. For Ricœur, freedom is to take upon oneself the origin of evil (as

[97] Ibid. 306 (emphasis in the text).
[98] Edward Greenwood, 'Literature: Freedom or Evil? The Debate between Sartre and Bataille' *in Sartre Studies International*, vol 4 (1), 1998, 17–29 (23).
[99] Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 191 (emphasis in the text).
[100] As quoted by Weil in *La Pesanteur et la grâce,* 90.
[101] Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 208.

literature does, according to Bataille, confessing its non-innocence, its guilt); evil, in its turn, is what reveals freedom, the terrible power to act against the Law.[102] As Ricœur underlines, to take upon oneself the origin of evil is to reject the ontology of evil, that is, the conception of evil as a 'being', and to recognise instead evil as a 'doing', as an act. Commenting on the temporality of the act of confession, which is an act of language that comes after the fact, the act of evil, Ricoeur notes that through it the three dimensions of time: past, present and future, are united, or, more precisely that the two dimensions of time: the future and the past, are tied together in the present: 'He who *will* bear the blame is the one who *now* takes the act upon himself and he who *has* acted […]. The future of the sanction and the past of action committed are tied together in the present of confession'.[103] Ricœur further adds that the reason for which I hold myself in the present responsible for a past act is because 'I could, and should, have done otherwise' (in Kantian terms, I recognise my power of acting according to the representation of a law – which is a question of the will – despite the fact that I didn't act according to the law). In this sense, freedom is set up by Ricœur as a tensional instance, inasmuch as it resides in 'the power to act according to the representation of a law *and* not to meet the obligation'.[104]

And yet, the unity of time that Ricœur comes upon and detects in the act of confession diverges from the unity of time that accompanies the Heideggerian call of conscience. In Heidegger's projective temporality, the call of conscience is a revelatory moment where the human being, brought back to themself, that is, towards themself as a future projection, both seizes and projects itself towards its potential, towards its possibilities. Unlike this Heideggerian moment of vision, the Ricœurian act of confession is a moment that throws both the subject and thought into confusion. The turning point in Ricœur's reasoning is when, attempting to exhaust the meaning of evil for ethics, he questions the foundation of evil and chooses to linger on the temporality of the evil act that comes before the act of confession. In doing so, he discloses within the evil action a discrepancy that takes the temporal configuration of a sliding. Pointing out evil as a first disposition of freedom that belongs and is bound to 'le fond démonique de la liberté humaine', Ricœur argues that evil exists as a 'manner of being of freedom, which itself comes from freedom' and thereby proves as inscrutable as freedom itself.[105] In this sense, in the occurrence of evil action, there is no origin in the sense of a temporal antecedent cause that

[102] Paul Ricœur, 'Guilt, Ethics and Religion', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures,* volume 2, March 1968, 100–17 (107).
[103] Ibid. 108 (italics in the text).
[104] Ibid. 109 (italics in the text).
[105] Paul Ricœur, *Le Mal. Un défi à la philosophie et à la théologie* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2004), 44 and Ricœur, 'Guilt, Ethics and Religion', 111.

can be retraced, but rather what Ricœur designates as 'an instantaneous passage from innocence to sin'. Following Kant, Ricœur acquiesces in what he calls 'the philosophical equivalent of the myth of the Fall', repeating the Kantian exclamation according to which 'every evil action, when pushed back to its rational origin, should be considered as if man had arrived at it directly from the state of innocence'.[106] In other words, it is '*as* Adam' (rather than '*in* Adam', because of Adam, the supposedly unique, anterior root of all expressions of evil), that we originate evil.[107]

What is compelling in Ricœur's reading of both the Adamic myth and its Kantian remodelling, is his engagement with the point where they flounder, the point where the emergence of evil cannot be conceptualized as an act of the will and the loss of origin or foundation this implicates. The enigma – the initial difficulty – of the foundation of evil leads to the aporia – the terminal difficulty – of evil as already there. As Ricœur concludes, the paradox of ethics is interrelated with this inherent contraction of freedom (the non-power of power, the non-freedom of freedom): while evil is what I could not have done (while I am free not to do evil), evil is this prior captivity that compels me to do evil (in doing evil I discover the non-power of my freedom).

The glimpse of evil as a prior captivity and the instantaneous passage from good to sin that operate as the termination, the limit, in Ricœur's and Kant's argumentation constitute precisely the starting point and the core of Bataille's approach. Bataille persistently ties his thinking with what Foucault designates as 'the opening' ('le décalage') made by Kant in Western philosophy.[108] In *La Littérature et le mal* Bataille's deepening of the Kantian opening consists of the crack, the hiatus he inflicts upon the present. In his insistence on the priority of the present, Bataille does not advocate the confinement of human existence within the present. Besides, Bataille's thought constantly reflects the human need to escape, to find a way out. In this respect, Bataille recites a passage from Baudelaire's *Journaux Intimes* that revolves around the centrality of time:

> « à chaque minute […] nous sommes écrasés par l'idée de la sensation du temps. Et il n'y a que deux moyens pour échapper à ce cauchemar, – pour l'oublier : le plaisir ou le travail. Le plaisir nous use. Le travail nous fortifie. Choisissons ».[109]

[106] Kant as quoted by Ricœur, 'Guilt, Ethics and Religion', 111.
[107] Ricœur, 'Guilt, Ethics and Religion', 111.
[108] Michel Foucault, 'Preface à la transgression', *Critique* 195–196 *(*août-septembre) 1963, 751–69 (756).
[109] Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 203.

A few lines further, Bataille elaborates on these two ways of escape. As he writes, 'le travail répond au souci du lendemain, le plaisir à celui de l'instant présent. Le travail est utile et il satisfait, le plaisir, inutile, laisse un sentiment d'insatisfaction'.[110]

The response, the choice, of both Baudelaire and Bataille to the above dilemma is curious in three aspects. Firstly, because the choice between pleasure and work, dissatisfaction and satisfaction, the present and the future, in brief, evil and good, is not strictly speaking a matter of choice, an act of the will. Commenting on Baudelaire's refusal to act like a real man, that is, a prosaic man engaging in the world of action, Bataille notes, '[Baudelaire] n'a pas de volonté, mais une attirance l'anime malgré lui. [...] Le Mal, que le poète fait moins qu'il en subit la fascination, est bien le Mal, puisque la volonté, qui ne peut vouloir que le Bien, n'y a pas le moindre part'.[111] Secondly, because pleasure, unlike the conventional use of the term, is not pleasing, pleasant and gratifying. As Bataille clarifies, pleasure brings and is linked to dissatisfaction rather than satisfaction. In this respect, the significance of the above passage lies neither in the opposition between work and pleasure, and in their association with usefulness and uselessness respectively, nor in the comprehension of work in terms of escape. The Romantic attack on the useful resides in the dissociation of leisure from work and in the reduction and impoverishment of life into a series of utilitarian ends to be reached and completed. Additionally, the Nietzschean condemnation of the work ethic lies in its serving an escapist diversion that distracts from self-reflection and from pondering upon our human condition. Against this context, the interest of the above passage lies in that it suggests and introduces another way to escape the sensation of time, to get out of our present situation, apart from the structure of the project (that is, apart from both intentionality and projection).

The mode of escape that Bataille looks and strives for, by introducing the ambiguous notion of an unsatisfying pleasure, can be thought of in the framework provided by Levinas' work *De l'évasion* (1936-7). In this early work, the question of being is raised, or rather the question of 'otherwise than being' is at first tackled.[112] Levinas' contesting the assumption that 'being is', namely that being is at one with itself, displays a fundamental duality that is situated and stands at the heart of human existence. Of course, as Levinas acknowledges, the question of being has been attacked long before him, as the opening line of the essay declares: 'la révolte de la philosophie traditionnelle contre l'idée de l'être procède du désaccord entre la liberté humaine

[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid. 207.
[112] The question will find its final articulation in Levinas' later work *Autrement qu'être ou Au-delà de l'essence* (1974).

et le fait brutal de l'être qui la heurte'.[113] The 'brutal fact of being' that restrains human freedom is both the being of the world, the fact that the external world is already there, and the being of existence, the givenness of human existence as such. Levinas' thinking both builds on and moves decisively beyond the attack of classical philosophy against the tautological assertion that 'being is'. As he writes, hinting at his distancing from classical debates: 'en combattant l'ontologisme, […] [la philosophie occidentale] luttait pour un être meilleur, pour une harmonie entre nous et le monde ou pour le perfectionnement de notre être propre'.[114] The Levinasian critique against traditional philosophy consists in that it wrestles with the problem of being from the standpoint of, and towards the ideal of, sufficiency, fulfillment, contentment, peace. These struggles, as he puts it 'ne brisent pas l'unité du moi qui […] est promis à la paix avec soi-même, s'achève, se ferme et se repose sur lui-même'.[115] In more blatant terms, Levinas proclaims that the limits of the human condition have always been understood in terms of limitation: 'l'insuffisance de la condition humaine n'a jamais été comprise autrement que comme une limitation de l'être, sans que la signification de « l'être fini » fût jamais envisagé'.[116]

In Levinas' overview of modern philosophy, both the eighteenth and nineteenth century Romantic revolt against reality (and its foreignness), as well as the twentieth century philosophy of the vital urge and becoming (according to which life-force creates values, instead of being bound by preexisting ones), aim at and are inscribed within the logic of full flowering (of a subject's proper reality) and fulfillment (of one's own destiny). Against the philosophical context of revolt (opposing the world, while assuring individual peace) and becoming (constantly creating and renewing 'being', and thereby ultimately serving and sustaining it, albeit in a less rigid form), Levinas introduces the notion of escape. Underlining the singularity of escape, he notes: 'l'evasion [...] met en question précisément cette prétendue paix avec soi [...]; c'est l'être même, le « soi-même », qu'elle fuit et nullement sa limitation'.[117] Unlike becoming that, in Levinas' view, denotes intentionality and directedness, inasmuch as it still implies 'going somewhere', escape consists of simply 'getting out' ('dans l'évasion nous n'aspirons qu'à sortir').[118] It is precisely its capacity to get out of being that renders escape crucial for Levinas' thinking. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, escape is put

[113] Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'évasion* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1982), 91.
[114] Ibid. 93.
[115] Ibid. 91.
[116] Ibid. 93.
[117] Ibid. 99.
[118] Ibid. 97.

forward as intimately bound up with being to the extent that being is reconfigured in terms of an escape. Escape, in the Levinasian understanding of the term, is not about the fleeing of a limited being towards inexhaustible possibilities and infinity; neither is it about running away from the narrowness of a realized life towards the promise of unrealized possibilities: 'dans l'évasion le moi se fuit non pas en tant qu'opposé à l'infini de ce qu'il n'est pas ou de ce qui ne deviendra pas, mais au fait même qu'il est ou qu'il devient'.[119] In an attempt to give a content, from a phenomenological standpoint, to the notion of escape, Levinas describes the dual experience of need and pleasure. Arguing against the common understanding of need in terms of privation and lack that searches for its appeasement and fulfilment in pleasure, Levinas challenges the metaphysical assumption which considers need synonymous with emptiness and the real synonymous with fullness ('une métaphysique où le besoin est d'avance caractérisé comme un vide dans un monde où le réel s'identifie avec le plein').[120] Contesting the common view of need and pleasure as states of privation and fullness, respectively, Levinas reconfigures both as variants of an unending dynamic process. More importantly, what need and pleasure unveil in their dynamism is the process of getting out of being (being itself, being oneself, being full and enriched). In the Levinasian view, need tends towards escape, rather than towards pleasure, satisfaction and appeasement; similarly, pleasure turns out to be disappointment and deceit, rather than a reestablishment of, and a return to, a natural plenitude. In doing so, they compel us to rethink the question of being in terms of an escape, namely how being is split, how it tends towards, is interrelated to and finally *is* an escape. In Levinas'

[119] Levinas, *De l'évasion*, 99. Regarding the promise of unrealized possibilities, Levians writes, 'l'évasion n'a donc que peu en commun avec ce besoin de « vies innombrables » qui est un motif analogue de la littérature moderne' (Levinas, *De l'évasion*, 98). The literary motif of 'innumerable lives' brings to mind, alongside other famous examples, the unmarried sisters of the 'Supper at Elsinore', whom Karen Blixen characterizes, alongside their intimate friends – old maids like them or unhappily married women – as 'dames of the round table of possibilities'. In her attempt to introduce the reader to the sisters' idiosyncratic characters, Blixen, Isak Dinesen, notes: 'perhaps to them the first condition for anything having real charm was this: that it must not really exist'. And she goes on narrating how the unmarried sisters pitied and somehow scorned their happily married friends who had husbands, children and grandchildren; despite the fact that the sisters lived an uneventful life, they felt that the path they had chosen was far more adventurous compared to that of their friends. Commenting upon and providing an explanation for their seemingly curious attitude, Dinesen writes: '[...] to them only possibilities had any interest; realities carried no weight. They had themselves had all possibilities in hand and had never given them away in order to make a definite choice and come down to a limited reality. They might still take part in elopements by rope-ladder, and in secret marriages, if it came to that.' A first reading of the above passage might associate the sisters' choice of an unmarried life with the dream for, and the celebration of, 'innumerable lives', a desire to keep open the multiplicity of unrealized possibilities that correspond to and appease the depths and the complexity of the self. And yet, I suggest that the subtlety of the above passage invites another reading: the uneventful, non-gratifying lives of the sisters – whose intimate circle consists of *unhappily* married women, alongside old maids – 'bring into question', to return to Levinas' definition of escape, 'precisely this alleged peace-with-self'. To put it another way, what Blixen and Levinas suggest is that it is not the limits, the limitation, of being that urges us to escape, but the suffocating plenitude of being. Karen Blixen*, Seven Gothic Tales* (London: Penguin, 2002), 211.

[120] Ibid. 103.

formulation, what need discloses is 'la pureté du fait d'être qui s'annonce déjà comme évasion';[121] 'le besoin exprime la présence de notre être et non pas sa déficience'.[122]

Whereas Levinas analyses need and pleasure as affective translations of finitude, Bataille, inversely, takes pleasure as his starting point and lingers on its temporal unfolding. This brings us to the third point as to how Baudelaire's and Bataille's response to the burden of time is curious, inasmuch as it consists in the pleasure of giving in the present. The Baudelairean and Bataillean preference for the present leaks out as the temporality of the impossible, since the present opens up as non-present (as non-presence); the present unclothes not in and as a temporal immediacy but as it slips away. To put it another way, the present gives access to a temporality that is neither a moment of fullness/plenitude (as in Heidegger), nor a moment of emptiness (as in Beckett). It is neither the Heideggerian fulfilment of *kairos*, the right moment (as disclosed in the projective temporality of *Dasein*), nor the Beckettian affirmation of the lack of content of pure time (as realized in the attention to time as time, as too much time). What both Bataille and Baudelaire come across is the paradox of the instant whose paradox lies in that we can accede it only by fleeing from it, while it withdraws as we try to seize it, as Bataille puts it, 'le paradoxe de l'instant – auquel nous n'accédons qu'en le fuyant, qui se dérobe si nous tentons de le saisir'.[123]

The key term of dissatisfaction, as it emanates from the temporality of the instant, brings into sharper focus the divergence between Sartre and Bataille. In Sartre's definition of poetry, unreservedly endorsed by Bataille, the poetic process consists of the fusion between subject and object, consciousness and the thing-in-itself, the man and the world, the perishable and the unchangeable. Subsequently, as poetic release fails to take the place of the objects once contemplated, the poet is condemned to permanent dissatisfaction. But while Sartre considers dissatisfaction to be poetry's and Baudelaire's moral deficiency, Bataille renders it poetry's (and literature's) strength, and valorizes it as ethical. In his confrontation with Sartre, Bataille displaces the focal point of literature from the object, which is to be possessed, towards desire (the impossible) which is merely to be pursued: 'Sartre a beau dire de Baudelaire « son souhait le plus cher est d'*être* comme la pierre, la statue, dans le repos tranquille de l'immutabilité » [...]'.[124] As Bataille elucidates, the poet yearns to capture the fleeting instant and to extract an immutable icon of his beloved city that was constantly changing through Haussmannisation.

[121] Ibid. 102.
[122] Ibid. 107.
[123] Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 208.
[124] Ibid. 198.

Yet, through his poems and his attitude as a *flâneur,* Baudelaire – essentially – turns out to participate in a life that is open, infinite, unsatisfiable: 'les images qu'il a laissés participent de la vie ouverte, infinie selon Sartre au sens baudelairien, c'est-à-dire insatisfaite'.[125] Hence, Bataille concludes, 'ainsi, est-il décevant de dire de Baudelaire qu'il voulait l'impossible statue, [...] si l'on n'ajoute aussitôt que Baudelaire voulut moins la statue que l'impossible'.[126]

In praising the poetic image as synonymous with dissatisfaction and movement (as opposed to the tranquility and immobility of the statue) and in shifting the poet's focus from the statue to the impossible, the above passage resonates in a way with the old condemnation of idols. As Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, 'une idole devient idole lorsque son adorateur est *satisfait* de l'adorer : n'importe quel Dieu ou diable peut ainsi devenir idole et peut-être tend toujours à le devenir'.[127] And in a daring gesture, Nancy equates immobility, or rather the satisfaction and appeasement that corresponds to immobility, with evil: 'c'est [...] dans une telle complétion – satisfaction, assouvissement, rassasiement, solution – que peut consister le mal : on s'y détourne de l'infini, on s'y complaît dans l'immobilité'.[128] Nancy's idiosyncratic discerning and remodelling of evil as completion, satisfaction, stillness, echoes and aligns with Weil's equally unorthodox conception of good as 'always new, marvellous, intoxicating'. In this sense, the Baudelairean and poetic repugnance towards satisfaction ('la crainte d'être satisfait'), the impotence of poetic existence (in its quest for the impossible and its complicity with dissatisfaction) – condemned as evil by classic morality as advocated by Sartre, while endorsed as evil by Bataillean hypermorality – turns into a higher good, which is, likewise, unsatisfiable, infinite and – to return to Weil's definition – always 'new, marvellous, intoxicating'.

The reconfiguration of good (through the trope of a concise form of evil) in terms of desire and impossibility offers an oblique response to the distressing question of theodicy, namely the justification of the existence of evil. In the final lines of her section dedicated to evil and entitled 'Le mal', Simon Weil raises the issue of evil's existence in the world. Inverting the premises of theodicy, she does not wonder 'how can there be evil in the world?'; instead, she asks 'Comment n'y aurait-il pas du mal dans le monde ?'.[129] And by way of an answer, she points towards desire, whose delirious purity *must* be, at any cost, shielded: 'Il faut que le monde soit

[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Adoration (Deconstruction du christianisme, 2)* (Paris: Galilée, 2010), 98 (my emphasis).
[128] Ibid.
[129] Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, 82.

étranger à nos désirs. S'il l'était sans contenir de mal, nos désirs alors seraient entièrement mauvais. Il ne le faut pas'[130] Similarly, Bataille insists that the authors examined in *La Littérature et le Mal* (authors of evil in the double sense of the world – writers and originators/makers) long for nothing but the good. In this regard, cross-fertilizing and moving beyond both Kantian idealism and the Nietzschean *amor fati*, the first opening a gap at the heart of being, between the world as it is and the world as it should be, and the second who suggested to will the world as it is (without wanting it to be different), Bataille's conception of evil, conjointly with Weil's, tend to suggest a third way, in which we affirmatively desire the world as it is not.

The time of literature

La Littérature et le mal posits literature as an heir to religious sacrifice, assigned the task of expressing in the modern era the enduring human exigency of challenging and infringing the law. Yet, while religious rituals inaugurate transgression as an institutionalized violation of norms and taboos carried out collectively by a community's members, literature gives voice to evil, that is, a denounced (rather than institutionalized) violation of norms, attempted in solitude (rather than shared within a community).[131] As Bataille puts it in *L'Erotisme*: 'le Mal n'est pas la transgression, c'est la transgression condamnée. Le Mal est exactement le péché'.[132] Furthermore, in *La Littérature et le Mal,* Bataille insists on the solitary, asocial and unfoundational character of the literary endeavour, inasmuch as it privileges the instant (instantaneous loss) over the future (duration and survival):

> [...] un tel enseignement ne s'adresse pas, comme celui du christianisme – ou celui de la religion antique –, à une collectivité ordonnée dont il serait devenu le fondement. Il s'adresse à l'individu isolé et perdu, auquel il ne donne rien que dans l'instant : il est seulement *littérature*.[133]

As Surya has argued, in the aftermath of the war, Bataille feels the urge to make a distinction between his liberty, the liberty of one (or some) from the liberty of all, the liberty of an organized society.[134] For, as Surya observes, 'ce qui vaut pour un individu ne vaut pas pour

[130] Ibid.
[131] For a more detailed account of the banishing of transgression from our modern societies due to the advent of Christianity and capitalism see: Libertson, 'Proximity and the Word: Blanchot and Bataille', 36–7.
[132] Georges Bataille, *L'Erotisme*, *OC X*, 140.
[133] Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 182.
[134] Surya, *Georges Bataille*, 499.

tous, c'est-à-dire pour une société organisée dont l'enjeu est de durer'.[135] In this regard, singular, Bataillean, morality (Bataille's challenge to morality, namely hypermorality) is set apart from collective, social morality: the latter is historical, inasmuch as it belongs to history and time, while the former is ahistorical, inasmuch as it belongs to the intensity of the instant.[136] Paying tribute to the hypermorality of the instant *in* and *as* literature, Bataille declares: 'la littérature ne peut pas assumer la tâche d'ordonner la nécessité collective'.[137]

Literature has a strangely privileged place in relation to evil and its temporality. Firstly, the act of writing as such can be, to some extent, considered to be synonymous with evil. Kafka and Baudelaire, to whom two of the essays of *La Littérature et le mal* are dedicated, consider themselves as being on the side of evil while writing, inasmuch as writing is not really an occupation; it is not real work in the sense of a productive, commercial activity (in Bataille's definition, 'écrire, c'est faire le contraire de travailler').[138] Moreover, for Bataille, the temporality of writing partakes of the instantaneous temporality of evil. In this respect, Bataille's dispute with Sartre and their divergent views of literature revolve precisely around the question of literature's temporality. The preference for the present, a recurrent motif in *La Littérature et le mal*, separates, alongside childhood from adulthood, poetic existence (as condensed in the figure of Baudelaire) from the prosaic realm of action, the Sartrean conception of literature (equated to prose and, ultimately, philosophical ideas) from the Bataillean conception of it (paired with poetry, not as a *genre* but in the poetic capacity to disengage from the production of meaning).

In his well-known distinction between prose and poetry, Sartre pleads for the transcendent signifying function of words in prose, namely the fact that they refer to something *beyond* themselves, as opposed to poetry's inward concern with the reality of language as such. While words in prose are associated with (pointing to and serving) the ideal of freedom, words in poetry are dissociated from any social or historical utility, as well as from the typical structure of language. Therefore, for Sartre, literature, to be worthy of its name, becomes identical to prose and is praised inasmuch as it offers a vision of a free future world. Going against Sartre, Bataille, as already mentioned above, asserts that 'the determination of the presence by the future', 'of what exists by what does not yet exist' – be it the signpost that points to the road,

[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 182.
[138] 'Georges Bataille à propos de son livre *La Littérature et le mal*', vidéo INA, 1958: https://www.ina.fr/video/I00016133.

the bookmarker that shows the page of the book or the celebrated and handed-over-to-literature-by-Sartre *modus operandi* of philosophy, namely philosophical transcendence – corresponds to a subordinate vision of being. In Bataille's view, literature addresses (and should address) the sovereign part of existence: literature is not a medium that communicates idea(l)s, most notably that of freedom; it rather is and conveys an unmediated experience where – rather than the prospect of happiness – merely, instantly, the smile of life appears ('le sourire auquel essentiellement la vie demeure égale y transparaît)'.[139]

Bataille renders literature a preferential site to address the intensity of the present moment, detached from those that follow for two reasons: first, unlike everyday life, it is not governed by the necessity to continue; second, unlike other forms of discontinuity and disruption, historical or philosophical, it is not governed by the necessity to conclude and to (re)create order. Indeed, in opposition to living, that is, living on, in opposition to life's essential and inescapable binding to continuance, the next day and thereby, inevitably, to some extent, the care of tomorrow, literature is made of inorganic stuff and is therefore intrinsically and enduringly free, as Bataille proclaims: 'étant inorganique, elle est irresponsable. Rien ne repose sur elle. Elle peut tout dire'.[140] Then, pointing out literature's dissimilarity from other instances of revolutionary undertaking, both historical and intellectual, he highlights: 'seule la littérature pouvait mettre à nu le jeu de la transgression de la loi – sans laquelle la loi n'aurait pas de fin – indépendamment d'un ordre à créer'.[141]

Regarding the last part of the sentence, which asserts literature's independence from the necessity to create order, the Bataillean reading of Kafka is insightful. Kafka's agonizing and desperate struggle, the continuing relevance and magnetism of the Kafkaesque, consists in sidestepping the frequent error of questioning, competing and therefore, ultimately, changing places with authority, as Bataille notes: 'L'attitude de Kafka devant l'autorité du père n'a de sens que l'autorité générale qui découle de l'*activité efficace*'.[142] And yet, Kafka's distancing from effective activity, achievement and conclusion might be seen as standing for literature's distancing not only from historical action, but also from philosophical undertaking. The latter, depending on rational and systematic argumentation, is guided by the exigency to conclude; it thereby ends up by somehow re-establishing order. In other words, philosophical questioning, even when it encounters its limits, bears within it the assuredness and vigour of authority. The

[139] Bataille, *La Littérature et le mal*, 187.
[140] Ibid. 182.
[141] Ibid. (italics in the text).
[142] Ibid. 285 (italics in the text).

above considerations bring us back to the first part of the sentence, which attests to the transgressive element of literature. If we accept literature's distinctiveness from other pursuits, we are still faced with the question of the way in which it reveals the process of breaking the law.

Literature's interconnectedness with the law is at the centre of Derrida's analysis 'Devant la loi', which bears and redoubles the title of Kafka's story ('Vor dem Gesetz'), a fable published both independently and as part of *The Trial*. For Derrida, there are two distinct senses in which literature and the law are interlaced. The first sense involves the fact that the field of literature has its own laws. Literature is governed by laws (which determine what belongs to 'literature', classifying texts as 'literary' and 'non-literary') and concurrently (at least literature in the sense that interests Derrida) undermines and suspends its (own) laws. In an attempt to demonstrate the strange status of the laws of literature, Derrida draws on the ambiguous structure of the title of Kafka's story. 'Before the Law' is the story's title, inaugurating a line of separation between itself and the narrative body. Though outside the narrative, it nevertheless belongs to fiction. Moreover, the same phrase is found again (a first or a second time? it is hard to tell) in the main body of the narrative, formulated as follows: 'Before the Law stands a doorkeeper'. The expression 'Before the Law', as the text's title, is before the text and external to its content, while it is also, as an incipit, inside the text as the initial internal element of the story's fictive content.[143] In its double status as both title and incipit, the inaugural phrase of the fiction exposes the origin of the text as split while the repetition of the phrase discloses the non-identity between two seemingly identical formulations.[144]

The second sense in which literature interlaces with the law involves the fact that the law is perpetually the subject of narratives. Kafka's story 'Before the Law' narrates precisely 'l'itineraire en vue du lieu et de l'origine de la loi'.[145] And yet, the story and the law appear and unfold concurrently, inasmuch as, while the law gives rise to the story, it is the story that brings about the theme of the law. Moreover, as the narrative unfolds and investigates what makes the law stand as the law, namely the being-law of the law, the interlacing of law and literature proves less thematic than structural. For, as Derrida argues, being before the law and being before a literary text, and by the same token, the being of the law and the being of literature, turn out to be intimately alike. But before addressing the structural similarity between literature

[143] Jacques Derrida, 'Devant la loi', A. Philipps Griffiths (dir.), *Philosophy and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 173–88 (176).
[144] Ibid. 181.
[145] Ibid. 179.

and the law, let us first linger on the being of law, as explicated in Kafka's story and Derrida's analysis.

The parable raises one of the most significant issues concerning the law, namely the relationship between the singular and the universal. As the countryman thinks, when his entering is not allowed, the Law should be accessible, at all times, to everyone. However, Derrida observes, while the Law is inaccessible, the gate is open. More crucially, entrance has been never denied; it has merely been delayed, deferred, enacting Derrida's favoured temporality: deferral, *différance*: 'tout est question de temps, et c'est le temps du récit'.[146] In his commentary, Derrida draws on how the oppositional positions of the countryman and the doorkeeper further divide and redouble the inscription 'before the law', within the main body of the text this time. Despite the fact that both men are 'before the law', the one – in order to effectively guard it – turns his back to it, while the other – waiting to enter it – faces it.[147] Again, a unique expression and position – that of being before the law – is brought into view as divided, doubled, split. Moreover, in their oppositional positions before the law, no one sees, or is in presence of, the law. This is due to the fact that, as Derrida divulges, the law itself is also double: the law forbids itself. It only prohibits to the extent that it is prohibited. In its inaccessibility, as a prohibited place without access, it manifests itself by non-manifesting, withholding, itself. Its origin, its proper taking-place, is unlocated.[148] This originary division of the law, its self-prohibition, places humans in a contradictory position: humans are simultaneously given the freedom of self-determination (since the law does not prohibit), and self-prohibition from entering it (since the law is prohibited). As Derrida affirms, before the law the human being is concurrently a subject of law and an outlaw (since s/he remains outside it; s/he does not enter it; s/he is not in it):

> Elle [la loi] est l'interdit : cela ne signifie pas qu'elle interdit mais qu'elle est elle-même interdite, un lieu interdit. Elle s'interdit et se contredit en mettant l'homme dans sa propre contradiction.[149]

In *Ethics of the Real* Alenka Zupančič observes that the fundamental paradox of ethics is that in order to set it up, a certain conception of ethics, a certain notion of good and evil, already needs to exist *prior* to it.[150] What Kant does, in an attempt to avoid the paradox (which

[146] Ibid. 182.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid. 183.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real. Kant and Lacan* (London, New York: Verso, 2000), 93.

nevertheless re-emerges at a following stage), is set up the moral law as self-founded and self-identical; in this respect, the good is defined as such *after* the moral law. On the contrary, what Derrida and Kafka do is expose the origin of the law (of what is before the law, both spatially and chronologically) as paradoxical. Or, as Bataille put it earlier, in the respective gestures of Kafka and Derrida, literature reveals 'the process of breaking the law' by exposing the law as fissured, self-prohibited, self-contradictory and double. This exposure is disclosed through the mode of being of the literary text. For, as Derrida argues, Kafka's story describes nothing but itself as a story, having no content beyond itself. And yet, this does not mean that the text in its self-referentiality becomes transparent, but that our access to it (and its significance) is denied, or more precisely, deferred. In its readability (as we read it) and unreadability (as it leads nowhere), Kafka's parable, both tautological and allegorical (of the Law as well as of the drama of reading), presents itself and its subject matter, the Law, as self-contradictory and lacking in essence.

In this respect, literature, for Derrida as well as for Bataille, can be seen as primarily undoing the fictive elements of the laws that compose our reality (fictions of origin, unity, coherence). Yet, the temporal unfolding of this undoing is conceived divergently by Bataille and Derrida: while for the latter, literary undoing (literature as undoing) enacts the temporality of deferral, for the former it bursts forth as an interruption. In his reading of 'Before the Law', Giorgio Agamben comments that all the interpreters of the story, including Derrida, focus on the element of openness, on the fact that 'the gate is open as usual'.[151] On the contrary, Agamben directs his attention to the end of the story and to the doorkeeper's last words: 'Now I am going to shut it'. Focusing on the final closing of the door, Agamben does not consider the countryman as defeated by the impossible and enigmatic presence/absence of the Law, but rather as succeeding in interrupting the Law's being in force. Therefore, in Agamben's view, the story is not about, as Derrida wanted it, 'an event which arrives at not arriving, which manages not to happen', but about the opposite: 'how something has really happened in seeming not to happen'.[152]

In the same way, I would argue that for Bataille and his privileging of the intensity of the instant, literature is not (about) something that does not take place, infinitely deferred, always to come; it is rather (about) how something happens in seeming not to happen. And yet, this

[151] Giorgio Agamben, 'The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin' in *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1999), 173.
[152] Giorgio Agamben, 'The Messiah and the Sovereign', 174.

something that happens while seemingly not happening, namely the closing that happens in and as literature, does not ultimately occur as the end (as it does in Kafka's story, being an allegory of the messianic event, both belonging and putting an end to historical time and its law); it occurs repetitively as the intensity of the instant. In *La Littérature et le Mal*, the trope of closing appears as the closing of the eyes, crystallized in René Char's saying: 'Si l'homme parfois ne fermait *souverainement* les yeux, il finirait par ne plus voir ce qui vaut la peine d'être regardé'.[153] In this respect, closing one's eyes is not simply an act of avoiding what is going on, but an act that enables us to see what is really worth seeing. And in Bataille's tragic vision, what is worth seeing gives rise not to an image of happiness (in the end, as the end) but to the bursting violence of laughter or the fleeting appearance of a smile.

What is worth looking at and how it is to be looked at was also a major theme in our chapter on Blanchot. After going into detail about the way in which a literary work relates to and negotiates with what is and remains outside, what is exterior to both the advent of language as well as to the springing up of a world, we somehow concluded that the gaze of Orpheus and Eurydice's image crystallize what literature and art can (and cannot) attain, what they fulfil (and fall short of): a presence, presented, in its withdrawal. And yet, one might object: doesn't this amount to making a case for failure as the achievement, the accomplishment, the success of literature? If this is so, as I seem to suggest, what makes it different from success? Conversely, if we consider literature's endeavour in terms of pure failure, what difference does it make?

Our chapter on Bataille emphasizes how the Bataillean moments in their absolute (unemployed) negativity are not constructive or productive and therefore are not to be considered as moments *within* or moments *towards* (something better and greater). And yet, the chapter guards against securing them as 'moments of being', moments in their own right – in particular, since literature arises as one of these moments. Rather than substantiating and separating the Bataillean moments off as such, the chapter calls attention to their contact with and affecting of what comes before and after. Therefore, the leap of inspiration – in terms closer to Blanchot's lexicon – is not simply a moment of carelessness, and transgression – in terms closer to the Bataillean lexicon – is not simply a momentary disruption. Our analysis of the Blanchotian literary paradigm of inspiration and the Bataillean entwinement of the literary with evil distances itself from a reading in terms of the plenitude of the void or the delirious purity

[153] Char's aphorism appears as the incipit of Bataille's 'Méthode de méditation', *O.C.V*, 192. René Char, *Feuillets d'Hypnos* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946, 2007), aphorisme 59, 24 (emphasis in the text).

of self-loss (that is, as instances where everything is lost but then everything resumes and continues). On the contrary, our emphasis on the key terms of the image (that is, the thing as distance) and the instant (that is, appearance as disappearance) shows how both thinkers install a void, a fissure, a rift within presence and the present due to which nothing changes but everything is transformed.

Writing, therefore, is rethought by both Bataille and Blanchot in terms of what would later be glossed in Nancy's major work of the 70's, *Logodaedalus*, as syncopation. The term 'syncopation' which indicates, in music, a rhythmic deviation, a missed beat or a spin, and in medicine, a fainting or a bump, is used in Nancy's tribute to Kant in the sense of discursive contingency (namely, as a demonstration that language is unavoidably embedded in the language of metaphysics). Yet, as in music, syncope is not the frailty of rhythm, but on the contrary, what gives the rhythm and the beat, and in medicine what disrupts an organism's biological process (or a self's consciousness) is not a deficiency, but a pause, a black-out that discloses, for the first time in a self-evident way, that there is an organism, similarly, Nancy's contrivance of the syncopation brings forth linguistic disruption not as the deficiency of the Kantian system, but as the simultaneous presentation and withdrawal of secure foundation whereby thought's attempt to present and ground itself is not only withheld and held back (hindered) but held (determined).[154] The syncope put forth by Bataille and Blanchot does not designate merely discursive contingency (and therefore is not to be confined to literature's relation with philosophy). On the contrary, it comes to designate, more broadly, a pause, a paralysis that is not merely a pause within a course, a disruptive moment after which things go on – resuming as if nothing occurred, or revitalized by what has occurred – but rather a pause that shows the joints and thereby affects both what comes before and what comes after while seemingly doing (changing) nothing.

In our analysis of *L'Espace littéraire* and *La Littérature et le mal*, we have seen how both Blanchot and Bataille challenge the presence of metaphysics, that is, the conception of the presence as self-identical in relation to past and future instances of presence, and how both writers bring forth an excessive non-self-identical presence, which is always outside itself, unable to gain an identity by reference to a telos (in the case of Bataille), or an underlying

[154] For a discussion of Nancy's *Logodeadalus* and the fateful implication of literature in the Kantian system, see Ian James, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy. The Fragmentary Demand* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2006), 44–7.

substance (in the case of Blanchot), or any transcendent principle exterior to it (in both Bataille and Blanchot).

Literature's attempt to account for another reality – outside what is present, in its spatial and temporal dimension – as explored above is comparable to (both converging and fighting against) the psychoanalytical endeavour. Psychoanalysis, also drawing on another reality (the psychic reality), explores and challenges what counts as real. Moreover, as the psychic reality put forward by Freud is not the bracketing of the external reality in favour of the subject's internal reality, but is rather situated indecisively at the crossroads of the imagined and the actual, and the analytical method consists of an emphasis on 'speech' rather than subjectivity, psychoanalysis raises questions that are at heart of what is at stake in our discussion of the literary real. Designating the Freudian method as 'un champ nouveau, celui du dire', Laplanche and Pontalis emphatically note, 'non pas « c'est *vous* qui le dites », mais « c'est vous qui le *dites* »'.[155] The analytical investigation of the real as well as the mutual implication of (psycho)analysis and literature in their corresponding attempts to approach the real will be the theme of our next chapter.

[155] Jean Laplanche et J.-B. Pontalis, *Fantasme originaire. Fantasmes des origines. Origines du fantasme* (Paris: Hachette, 1985), 19 (emphasis in the original).

Chapter 6
The speech of analysis

An unwritten law divides all texts in two categories, the ones that do the interpreting, and the ones that are there mostly to be interpreted.
(René Girard, 'Narcissism: Demystified by Proust')

One of Freud's early essays, 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming', written in 1908, draws on the question of the origin of the artwork, as the latter attests for Freud to the fundamental human desire to transform the existing world of reality. Attempting to decipher the enigma of creativity, the father of psychoanalysis draws a parallel between the creator ('that strange being, the creative writer') and the child at play.[156] For Freud, every child that plays behaves like a writer; similarly and conversely, the writer does the same as a child that plays: they both create an imaginative world, sharply separating it from reality, and they take this world very seriously. As people grow up and cease to play, in Freud's economic system of psychic stability, where there are only exchanges and substitutes and nothing is given up or lost, the growing child, instead of playing, phantasizes: '[the growing child] builds castles in the air and creates what are called day-dreams. I believe that most people conduct phantasies at times in their lives'.[157] For Freud, what differentiates a child's play from phantasizing is that the child, unlike the airy castles of adults, *links* the imagined objects with real objects in the world (for example, it is a chair that becomes a house). And, as for what differentiates creative activity from phantasizing, Freud points to 'ars poetica', of which a rather meagre definition is provided. According to Freud, poetic art consists of softening the egoistic character of day-dreaming and in highlighting form: 'the writer softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering it [i.e., the egoistic character] and disguising it and he bribes us by the purely formal – that is, aesthetic – yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies'.[158]

The essay's simplistic view of art as authorial wish-fulfillment has been widely criticized. Peter Brooks, restating the view of recent psychoanalytic criticism, notes that 'Freud speaks most pertinently to literary critics when he is not explicitly addressing art',[159] while Fredric Jameson suggests that the value of the essay lies not in the solution offered but in the formulation of the

[156] Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming' in *Art and Literature*, transl. James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1990), 131.
[157] Freud, 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming', 133.
[158] Ibid. 141.
[159] Peter Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 27.

problem.[160] If, for Jameson, from the viewpoint of Marxist criticism, Freud's formulation of the problem is interesting inasmuch as it unfolds a dialectic between private and public, pre-social and social, individual and collective (as he puts it, 'a dialectic between individual desire and fantasy and the collective nature of language and reception'),[161] I want to direct my attention to the first point of the essay that has been persistently overlooked, where Freud illuminates the interrelatedness between literary activity and childhood, especially as Bataille and Blanchot seem to be picking up the threads of the Freudian conjecture in their definitions of literature. In *La Littérature et le mal*, literature is defined by Bataille as a return to and of childhood: 'la littérature, je l'ai, lentement, voulu montrer, c'est l'enfance enfin retrouvée',[162] while in *L'Espace littéraire*, writing is linked by Blanchot to fascination ('écrire, c'est disposer le langage sous la fascination') and fascination is traced back to childhood ('que notre enfance nous fascine, cela arrive parce que l'enfance est le moment de la fascination').[163]

Yet, the Bataillean return to childhood, echoing to some extent the Freudian conception of the uncanny, rather than a homecoming, turns out to be *unheimlich*, and Blanchotian fascination is a threatening and disarming moment, rather than a moment of joy or pleasure. In this respect, Bataille's and Blanchot's conjoining of literature and childhood problematizes the idea of revival and recovery of an earlier condition that underlines the Freudian principle of constancy. Yet if we momentarily put aside the dimension of play that Freud associates with the child, and, analogically, with the writer's imaginative activity, the child – the focal point of psychoanalysis in many ways – calls attention to, as Christopher Fynsk has argued, 'questions of general import concerning the human relation to language'.[164] Fynsk reminds us that the in-fans, as its etymology attests, is without language: it does not speak. In this sense, the advent of the subject through language happens as a result of the death of the infans, and also brings it forth. In other words, the death of the child marks and haunts the origin of our relation to language. Additionally, the Freudian primal scene, which triggers an enigma that the child

[160] As Jameson writes, in favour of the essay: 'far from using the identification of literary productivity with private fantasy as a pretext for "reducing" the former to the latter, on the contrary [the essay] very specifically enumerates the theoretical difficulties such an identification must face'. Fredric Jameson, 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism and the Problem of the Subject' in *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 338–95 (339–40).
[161] Jameson, 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan', 342.
[162] Georges Bataille, 'Avant-Propos', *La Littérature et le mal*, 172.
[163] Maurice Blanchot, 'La Solitude essentielle', 31, 30. Showing how fascination unsettles passivity and activity by enacting a somehow active passivity, Blanchot notes how the fascinated child renders the mother fascinating,as he puts it: 'c'est parce que l'enfant est fasciné que la mère est fascinante'. Blanchot, 'La Solitude essentielle', 30.
[164] Christopher Fynsk, 'Introduction', *Infant Figures. The Death of the Infans and Other Scenes of Origin* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1.

cannot interpret, is close to Bataille's and Blanchot's conception of the literary experience in terms of a response to an alterity (rather than in terms of active interpretative mastery).

In *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction*, Malcolm Bowie opens his first chapter, dedicated to 'Freud's dreams of knowledge', with an epigraph by the Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi.[165] Verdi's epigram 'Let us return to the past; it will be a step forward' offers a foretaste of the Freudian dream of knowledge. Indeed, passion for the origin – a primary event, a primary scene – animates Freud and psychoanalysis. Moreover, the origin, the original persistently looked for, is understood in terms of anteriority and depth and is endowed with an exegetic power. Drawing on the theme of anteriority, which haunts and determines the Freudian enterprise, Bowie defines psychoanalysis, as well as archaeology, as 'the quest for, and the systematic study of, anterior states'.[166] Bowie, lingering over Freud's archaeological metaphors, goes on to add that this turning back, this stepping backwards towards the anterior, is due to the fact that for Freud 'that which came before, whether in a life of civilisation or in the life of a mind' has a considerable influence on 'that which is'.[167] This anterior origin, the conception of origin as anterior and past, is also linked with layering and profundity. As Bowie remarks, the Freudian credo, inherited from the sciences of stratification, could be resumed as follows: 'that which is earlier is deeper', 'that which is deeper is closer to the origins'.[168] Finally, the depths are elevated to the guarantors of meaning, since 'it is only in the origin that scientific explanations can find their guarantee'.[169] Firmly believing not only in the indestructability of the past – be it a psychical or an archaeological object – but also, and perhaps more crucially, in the ability of the analytical and the archaeological endeavour to bring to light the buried and the inaccessible, Freud's dream of knowledge seems at first glance to be, as Malcolm Bowie suggests, synonymous with 'explanatory completeness'.[170] In this dialectic of burial and excavation, Bowie writes, 'the traumatic event "explains" the neurotic symptom just as the prior existence of Minoan-Mycenean civilization "explains" the glorious richness of Greek art'.[171]

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[165] Malcolm Bowie, *Freud, Proust, and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 13. Verdi's saying is part of his correspondence with the librarian of the Conservatorio of Naples, Francesco Florimo.
[166] Bowie, *Freud, Proust and Lacan*, 18.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid. 23. More precisely, Bowie stages these two mottos as the teachings of the sciences of stratification (that is, archeology, geology and paleontology) handed on to psychoanalysis.
[169] Bowie, *Freud, Proust and Lacan*, 23. This is the third motto/teaching of the sciences of stratification handed on to psychoanalysis.
[170] Ibid. 24.
[171] Ibid.

As becomes clear, the Freudian dream of knowledge, in its aspiration to decipher traces of the past, does not simply implicate the act of narration, but intrinsically *is* a narrative. The talking cure, the method posited by Freud, consists of the moving from an incoherent, disordered, unintelligible narrative (an insufficient account of the event) towards a more coherent, connected, consistent narrative (a more adequate account of the past event).[172] Defining the talking cure in terms of a 'moving back' and a 'linking', Peter Brooks notes that: 'moving back from present symptoms, and the incoherent narrative offered in explanation of them, to the traumatic events [...], then the linking of events in an uninterrupted causal series, provides a narrative that is itself curative'.[173]

Additionally, Peter Brooks shows how this motif of 'moving back', the quest for the origin, is thematized in the 19th century novel. In his essay 'Freud's Masterplot', Brooks convincingly argues that the main character's itinerary in *Great Expectations* – Dickens' novel standing in for the great 19th century novel – seemingly opposes but essentially falls in step with Verdi's epigram ('let us return to the past; it will be a step forward'), since all his steps forward are ultimately nothing but a return to his past (what he calls 'that old spell of my childhood').[174] '[...] Each of Pip's choices in the novel', Brooks suggests, 'while consciously life-furthering, forward oriented, in fact leads back to the insoluble question of origins'. 'Pip's story', Brooks goes on, 'while ostensibly the search for progress, ascension and metamorphosis, may after all be the narrative of an attempted homecoming: of an effort to reach the assertion of origin through ending, to find the same in the different, the time before in the time after'.[175] Now, if for Brooks – despite the fact that the ending conflates with the origin, the different with the same, the time after with the time before – the novel finally offers more than their happy coincidence, since 'recognition cannot abolish textuality' and the textual middle, in its oscillatory *in-betweenness*, is the truth of the narrative, I want to suggest that literary and psychoanalytic truth (the space of literature and analysis) challenge and throw into confusion the very notions of origin and ending, rendering them problematic as such.[176] I hope to show then that the value of the psychoanalytic model – and its convergence with literature – lies in

[172] In this respect, the talking cure derives its power and persuasiveness in relation to its object, the narrated event, as well as by the internal relationship of the elements that constitute the narrative chain itself.
[173] Peter Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994) 49.
[174] As quoted by Peter Brooks in his article 'Freud's Masterplot: Questions of narrative' in *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, 280–300 (298).
[175] Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot', 298. Here, Brooks does not commit the common error of simply psychoanalyzing the literary character, since what is at stake is the beginning and the ending of the text itself.
[176] Brooks posits the obstinacy of the textual middle as a defiance to the linearity of recognition as follows: 'Yet recognition cannot abolish textuality, does not annul the middle which, in its oscillation between blindness and recognition, between origins and endings, is the truth of the narrative text'. Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot', 296.

its contribution to the determination (that is, the recasting) of the concept of truth. More crucially, in my attempt, I will move away from the prevailing view that comprehends the truth of psychoanalysis – and its analogy with novelistic truth – in terms of plausibility, towards an understanding of psychoanalytic – and literary – truth in terms of impossibility. Against the consideration of truth in terms of coherence, continuity and persuasiveness (the redefinition of truth as what is plausible – in regard to the accounted event – and well-formed – in regard to the narrative chain itself), the Lacanian return to Freud brings forth a radical recasting of truth as heterogeneous, spasmodic and erratic, which makes advances to the Real.

In Lacan's essay 'La Chose freudienne', truth becomes the narrator of a strange apologue, truth speaks (itself) and says the following:

> Je vagabonde dans ce que vous tenez pour être le moins vrai par essence: dans le rêve, dans le défi au sens de la pointe la plus gongorique et le nonsense du calembour le plus grotesque, dans le hasard, et non pas dans sa loi, mais dans sa contingence […].[177]

The most striking aspect of the passage is, of course, that Lacan stages the truth while it speaks, as that which speaks. But before commenting on this quasi-performative element of truth, I want to direct my attention to the distinct conception of truth that ensues from this essay. Against the common understanding of the term, truth converges on conceit, is found in dreams (rather than in reality), wanders (rather than being fixed) and defies, obstructs, suspends interrupts (rather than makes, promotes, advances and furnishes us with) sense. Put briefly, an irregular conception of truth comes forth that does not evoke reality in terms of solidity and constancy. In other words, and in an attempt to gloss the above displacing in a Lacanian way, truth is not challenged in its relation with reality (the truth as revelation or adequation, presented or represented, uncovered or recovered, constructed or reconstructed), but inasmuch as it drifts towards the Real. However, before looking into Lacan's return to Freud, we first need to turn to Freud and consider his conception of desire, not as wish-fulfilment, but as what transcends – or rather decentres – being. In doing so, Freud unties being from presence and permanence, the analytic process from interpretation (putting forward the primacy of interruption) and theory from firmness and rigidity.

As Bowie points out, for Freud the intellectual life of neurotics involves, firstly, a reversal, and secondly, a shift: in the reversal the thinking-process is not a sublimation of sexuality but

[177] Jacques Lacan, 'La Chose freudienne', *Écrits I* (Paris: Seuil, 1966, 1979, 1999), 407.

becomes itself a source of (sexual) pleasure; in the shift pleasure is not linked to the content of thought but to the act of thinking itself, as Freud puts it: '[…] the intellectual feeling, so much desired, of having found a solution recedes more and more into the distance'.[178] The thought-process of neurotics (thinking in vain, in detachment from external material), Bowie argues, unfolds the ineliminable conditions of thought in general, and Freud's theoretical constructions and writings in particular. The transformational process, the primary object of psychoanalytic inquiry (how an unconscious experience transforms itself), turns out to concern – and transform – primarily psychoanalytic inquiry. In this regard, as Bowie remarks, 'the psychoanalyst's constructions were similar in function with the delusions of his patients'.[179] Consequently, the Freudian dream of knowledge recedes from 'explanatory completeness' to find itself momentarily (un)realized in provisional, partial constructions that keep changing. Against the solidity of theoretical constructions, Bowie and Freud put forward theory as fiction, thereby reconfiguring both the theoretical and the fictitious as that which does not last. Desire is not desire of the end (of solution), since, as Freud contends, 'the intellectual feeling, so much desired, of having found a solution recedes'. This chapter suggests that this receding is not to be understood as simply enacting a temporality of detour that will make the end even more gratifying, since theory as fiction, theory in its entwinement with fiction, shifts away from fulfilment and becomes concurrently articulated and unconsumed.[180]

Taking into consideration two key Freudian elements, namely dreams and children's play, and radicalizing their reading in terms of interruption (against continuity) and repetition (against mastery), this chapter dissociates the analytic process from interpretation and psychoanalytic theory from the scopic tradition and associates them with interruption and repetition, respectively. In his study of dreams in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), an essay that marks a turning point as views and principles of earlier texts are revisited, Freud attests to the fact that dreams, in the case of traumatic neuroses, rather than enable and facilitate one's sleep, result in frightful wake-ups. In this respect, as Critchley remarks, the primary function of dreams proves to be not the continuation of sleep, but its interruption: 'the original function of dreams is not the dreamwork (die Traumearbeit) that permits the sleeper to sleep on, it is rather

[178] Sigmund Freud, 'Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis' as quoted by Bowie in *Freud, Proust and Lacan*, 43.
[179] Bowie, *Freud, Proust and Lacan*, 43.
[180] Brooks opts for this temporality of detour, in which end and detour constantly nourish each other. For Brooks, 'desire is the wish for the end, for fulfillment but fulfillment delayed'. Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot', 299.

the interruption of sleep, die Trauma-Arbeit, that is beyond the pleasure principle.'[181] Similarly, in the case of the famous fort/da game, the game of disappearance and return invented by Freud's grandson, among the many questions that the child's repetitive gesture of loss and retrieval raises (questions of displacement – from the mother's disappearance to the toy's disappearance, transformation – of an unpleasant experience to a pleasurable one, entry into language – by means of the baby's exclamations 'Oh', 'Ah'), what interests us particularly here is whether repetition should be considered as a movement from passivity to mastery (as the child's control of loss and, thereby, in Freudian terms, still bound to the pleasure principle), or whether repetition (casting the shadow of a doubt over the primacy of the pleasure principle) needs to be reconsidered as primal (that is, in Freudian terms, beyond – and distinguishable from – the pleasure principle).[182] Drawing on and moving beyond the function of dreams and the significance of the fort/da game, this chapter shows the centrality of interruption and repetition in the analytic process and theory.

The analytic process: from interpretation to interruption

The Freudian revisiting of origins proves to be more complicated and less straightforward than initially anticipated. Freud's great discovery, the unconscious, persistently defies the characteristics of anteriority, depth and the etiologic, as posited at the beginning of this chapter. Firstly, in a similar manner to the Faulknerian past that claims 'actually it's not even past', the Freudian unconscious is constantly and overwhelmingly present, in jokes, dreams, slips of the tongue. Secondly, as Freud makes clear in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, unconscious desire should not be equated with the secret and the hidden beneath the surface, with the latent content (the dream-thought) behind the manifest form (the dream-text), since the unconscious is not (in the) latent but *between* the latent and the manifest. In this sense, Freud, on the one hand, directs our attention to dreams, rendering them meaningful rather than meaningless, worth being looked into rather than ignored; on the other hand, for Freud, our attention should focus on the form of the dream rather than on its hidden meaning.[183] Finally, in his essay dedicated

[181] Simon Critchley, *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity. Essays on Derrida, Levinas, & Contemporary French Thought* (London and New York; Verso, 1999), 193

[182] For these two readings of the fort/da game, see Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot', 286–7.

[183] As Freud writes, 'I used at one time to find it extraordinarily difficult to accustom readers to the distinction between the manifest content of dreams and the latent dream-thoughts. […] The need to interpret (it) would be ignored. But now that analysts at least have become reconciled to replacing the manifest dream by the meaning revealed by its interpretation, many of them have become guilty of falling into another confusion which they cling to with an equal obstinacy. *They seek to find the essence of dreams in their latent content* and in so doing they overlook the distinction between the latent dream thoughts and the dream-work. At bottom, dreams are nothing but a particular form of thinking [...]. *It is the dream-work which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming*'. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: Penguin, 1977), 650 (my emphasis).

to Serge Leclaire 'La psychanalyse comme anti-herméneutique', Jean Laplanche, invoking Freud in support and supporting Freud, insists on and fosters the anti-interpretative axis of the analytic method. Aware of the paradoxical attempt to dissociate the discipline that initiated us into the interpretation of dreams from the burden of interpretation, he writes: 'Comment la psychanalyse – ne serait-ce qu'avec son ouvrage fondamental intitulé *L'interprétation du rêve* – ne rencontrerait-elle pas tout naturellement le mouvement herméneutique [...] précisément comme théorie, méthode et pratique de l'interprétation ?'.[184]

Hermeneutics is defined by Laplanche as a process of reading – of a text, a destiny, a *Dasein* '(d'un texte, d'une destinée, d'un Dasein)' – which provides 'a translation code or a key', inasmuch as it is based on 'a pre-comprehension or proto-comprehension' ('une lecture qui se fonde, évidemment, sur une précompréhension or protocompréhension préalable').[185] On the contrary, psychoanalysis, and more precisely, the analytic method, for Laplanche, is anti-hermeneutic, anti-exegetic (inasmuch as it offers no key or code but only individual and spontaneous associations), as well as anti-synthetic (inasmuch as personal associations defy and dissociate themselves from pre-established chains of meaning). Moreover, to return to the question of origins but from the angle of the method's own origins, psychoanalysis began as the study of neurosis, which emerges precisely as, and due to, a failure of synthesis. Laplanche posits the method as literally an ana-lysis, that is a *lysis*, a loosening, a disintegration, a breaking down (from *lyein*, that is, to unbind, to compromise integrity), as he notes, 'la méthode est analytique au sens propre du terme, associative-dissociative, déliante. On la dirait « déconstructive » – et le terme de *Rückbildung* est bien présent chez Freud – si le mot n'avait ensuite été accaparé et acclimaté dans une philosophie exogène'.[186]

The analytic process is not simply an interplay of filling in (the gaps) and opening up (calling for more and more interpretation); it rather defies and subverts the interpretative act as such. As Ellie Ragland-Sullivan observes, the analytic method involves interruption rather than interpretation. The analyst intervenes not by filling in the gaps and reconstituting the thread of an incoherent narrative; the analyst punctuates the narrative by interrupting it: 'the technique relies less on interpretation, be it surface or deep, than on interruption. [...] The analyst interrupts to punctuate the discourse and to introduce a sense that eventually can be grasped by

[184] Jean Laplanche, 'La psychanalyse comme anti-herméneutique' in *Entre séduction et inspiration : l'homme* (Paris: Quadrige, Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 243.
[185] Ibid. 244.
[186] Ibid. 252.

the analysand'.[187] Drawing on Laplanche's remark, and bringing in the psychoanalytic axiom 'analysis again and again', could it be, as Barbara Johnson suggests, that the speech of analysis, *la parole pleine*, against its connotation of fullness, approaches Derridean *writing*? In Johnson's words, 'Is it not equally possible to regard what Lacan calls "full speech" as being *full* of what Derrida calls *writing*?'.[188]

In his reading of Freud's essay 'Constructions in analysis', Peter Brooks comments on how analytic reconstructions ultimately turn out to be constructions, as the dropping of the *re* in the essay's title suggests. With regard to the Freudian talking cure, Brooks traces a shift of emphasis from the narrative chain itself ('the coherent, ordered, chronological story') towards the inseparability between the story (the events, the raw material, the Russian 'fabula', Genette's 'histoire') and narrating (telling, Genette's 'narration').[189] In this respect, for Brooks, as well as for Freud, narrative truth is redefined in terms of plausibility (and not of verifiability), since the aim is not the re-collection, the re-capturing, the re-construction of the events, but their 'figuring' in a construction. As Brooks writes, 'thus we learn that parts of the story of the past may not ever be recalled by the person whose story it is, or was, but may nonetheless be *figured* in a construction of them by the analyst-narratee – a construction which is unsubstantiated, unverifiable, yet carries conviction'.[190] Consequently, for Brooks, narrative truth (be it analytic or literary) 'seems to be a matter of conviction, derived from the plausibility, and well-formedness of the narrative discourse, and also from […] its power to persuade us that things must have happened this way, since here lies the only explanatory narrative, the only one that will make sense of things'.[191]

As a step towards approaching the Real, the most problematic (and elusive) term of Lacan's trilogy, I want to introduce the end of storytelling, as formulated most notably by Walter Benjamin's famous essay, 'The Storyteller'. Against Brooks' standpoint that considers

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[187] Ellie-Ragland Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 83.
[188] Barbara Johnson, 'The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan Derrida', in *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, 457–505 (473).
[189] For Brooks, who insists on the place and the role of the reader, this shift is crucial, as it brings about a redirection of focus as well as a temporal rearrangement: firstly, the act of narrating becomes significant inasmuch as the story (the narrative, Genette's 'récit') emerges due to, in and through narrating; secondly, the story (the material, Genette's 'histoire') turns out to come not before but after the narrative (the story as 'récit'). As Brooks writes, 'Though we tend to talk – as Freud does – of the "story" as primary, a moment's reflection allows us to see that it is in fact derivative of the "discourse", the product of the reader's interpretation of a normalized chronology from what the narrative discourse gives us'. Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, 74 (note 8).
[190] The term 'figuring' is meant here as both a depiction and an assumption. Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, 59.
[191] Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, 59.

storytelling as our ability to make sense, Benjamin brings in, abruptly, the end of storytelling, our inability to make a story. In doing so, to the framework revolving around the loss of origin, Benjamin opposes the loss of the art of storytelling. Benjamin's main thesis is, as Shoshana Felman notes, that 'storytelling is lost to the twentieth century', since 'it has become impossible to tell a story'.[192] The reason for this loss is the dumbness caused by the First World War. The muteness of the body, as Felman puts it, due to the deafening noise of explosions, reduces narration to silence: 'resonating to this dumbness of the body is the storyteller's dumbness'.[193] As she writes further, highlighting the dimension of loss of narration: 'The First World War is the first war that can no longer be narrated. Its witnesses and its participants have lost their stories'.[194] In parallel, Felman, alluding to Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', elaborates what she designates as 'his second theory of silence': here, speechlessness arises due to World War Two and affects not literature (and storytelling), but historical narration: 'like the storyteller who falls silent or returns mute from the First World War, the historian or the theorist of history facing the conflagration of the Second World War is equally reduced to speechlessness: no ready-made conceptual or discursive tool [...] turns out to be sufficient to explain the nature of this war'.[195]

Psychoanalysis revolves around a comparable muteness and points to an analogous deficiency of conceptual and discursive tools. Indeed, what began as an aspiration of explanatory completeness and a model of symptomatic reading (moving from the surface towards the deeper, the hidden truth of the primary event) steadily brings forth an asymptotic relation, precisely due to the overwhelming power of the primary event that defies all attempts of mastery and understanding. Alluding to the paradoxical constitution of the analytic process and delineating it as a tensional space, Leclaire writes: 'd'une part, on dit que le travail analytique consiste à rendre conscient ce qui est inconscient ; de l'autre part il est avéré que l'inconscient en tant que tel est irréductible, et qu'il échappe, de par sa nature, à toute saisie consciente'.[196]

Due to the nature of its object (the unconscious), the psychoanalytic endeavour (the representation of the unconscious) raises wider questions of representation and representability. The elusive and the irreducible enact a representational crisis which

[192] Shoshana Felman, 'Benjamin's Silence', *Critical Inquiry* 25: 2, Winter 1999, 201–34 (205).
[193] Ibid. 206.
[194] Ibid. 207.
[195] Ibid. 208.
[196] Serge Leclaire, 'L'Inscription inconsciente : une autre mémoire', in *Écrits pour la psychanalyse 1. Demeures de l'ailleurs. 1954–1993* (Paris: Seuil/Arcanes, 1996), 180

establishes and increases the points of contact between art and analysis (bringing about 'the art of analysis)'. Moreover, Leclaire underlines how this crisis of representation does not simply arise due to the nature – the distinguishing, or rather the disquieting, features – of the unconscious, but mainly due to its *presence*, since as he notes: 'l'inconscient est, plus que tout autre chose au monde présent, là, « *hic et nunc* », dans tous les actes et paroles de notre vie la plus quotidienne'.[197] The unconscious, whose presence is to be comprehended along the semantic axes of the spatial and the temporal, here and now, unmediated and immediate, misplaces and disrupts precisely 'that which is'.

To emphasize this, Leclaire makes an effort to demystify, to strip off the aura of the (traumatic/unconscious) event. In this attempt, he suggests and stages the following scenario: someone decides to confide some inspired, improvised, thoughts in a recording machine; the next morning, (s)he realizes that the needle has been deceptive and that nothing has been recorded. Leclaire raises the following question: 'Que reste-t-il de votre géniale improvisation ?';[198] and he offers the following answer – and a bit of advice:

> À en juger par la violence de vos sentiments à cet instant précis, *infiniment plus* que si la machine vous renvoyait le reflet de votre voix […] Un conseil, si vous en avez alors le courage, prenez cette fois du papier et un crayon et vous verrez que ce qui vous vient sous le coup de cette perte sera *bien meilleur* que ce que vous avez énoncé la veille au soir, comme si le nouveau texte, fort de cette perte, retrouvait les sources inconscientes de ce que l'on appelle la création. Et si ce n'est pas encore assez bon, vous n'avez qu'à perdre votre manuscrit dans le métro ! Le tout est ne pas tenter de reproduire ce qui a été perdu, mais de prendre appui sur cette perte [...].[199]

Such a framing of the problem of loss radically recasts the significance of origin. If, as Leclaire suggests, what is left is 'infinitely more' and what is written is 'far better', the significance of loss seems to give its place to the significance of repetition. In doing so, the psychoanalytic project seems to shift away from the preoccupation with the lost, absent, inaccessible origin and to gesture towards the problematization of the idea of unity. The remnant – being more – and the (re)written – being better (and better) – contribute to the determination of the concept of double and doubling, suggesting, as Barbara Johnson does, that 'one equals two' (1=2). In her discussion of doubleness and doubles, Johnson asks: 'What is the relation between a

[197] Ibid. 184.
[198] Ibid. 181.
[199] Ibid. (my emphasis).

divided unity and a duality? Are the two *two's* synonymous? [...] If the doubles are forever redividing or multiplying, does the number "2" really apply? If 1=2, how can 2=1+1?'.[200]

As Lacan suggests in his essay 'Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage', the most fundamental and unsettling double is that of reality as it emerges in and as speech. For Lacan, we (and our thinking) are embedded in language, as he writes:

> L'ambiguïté de la révélation hystérique du passé ne tient pas tant à la vacillation de son contenu entre l'imaginaire et le réel, car il se situe dans l'un et dans l'autre. Ce n'est pas non plus qu'elle soit mensongère. C'est qu'elle nous présente la naissance de la vérité dans la parole, et que par là nous nous heurtons à la réalité de ce qui n'est ni vrai, ni faux.[201]

The passage, firstly, displays what Bowie designates as 'Lacan's ambitious philosophy of the human', where everything counts and is embraced as true (lies, the imaginary and the real).[202] Secondly, it underlines how words make us and continue to do so. In Bowie's remark, 'it is the peculiar privilege of man the language-user to remain oblivious, while making things with words, of the extent to which words have made, and continue to make, him'.[203] Thirdly, and perhaps more crucially, brought and read together with the above-mentioned essay 'La Chose freudienne', the passage elucidates the significance of the fact that truth speaks. Speech bears and gives birth to truth – to a truth, neither true or false, as there is no signified (no truth) in a pure, separable form. In his later essay 'La Science et la vérité', Lacan sheds further light on the fact that truth does not speak *about* but merely speaks ('Moi, la verité, je parle'), as he writes, 'il n'y a pas de métalangage [...], nul langage ne saurait dire le vrai sur le vrai, puisque la vérité se fonde de ce qu'elle parle. et qu'elle n'a pas d'autre moyen pour ce faire'.[204] In a similar way, theory, as suggested by Lacan, does not write about, but mainly writes and (re)writes. And in its entwinement with language, theory approaches the act of writing.

Psychoanalytic theory: from seeing to writing

In the essay 'La psychanalyse comme anti-herméneutique', in his effort to dissociate psychoanalysis from exegetic reduction, Jean Laplanche raises the following question: 'Une

[200] Johnson, 'The Frame of Reference', 472.
[201] Jacques Lacan, 'Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage', *Écrits I*, 254.
[202] Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), 111.
[203] Ibid. 109. In this respect, the relationship between language and the unconscious is twofold: the unconscious exerts pressure upon language, but equally language creates the unconscious.
[204] Jacques Lacan, 'La Science et la verité', *Écrits II* (Paris: Seuil, 1966, 1970, 1999), 348.

théorie, pour quoi faire? Pour maîtriser une énigme, proposé par le monde des adultes, à l'enfant'.[205] In this definition of theory as a mastery of enigmas, the question that subsequently arises is how we are to give an account of and specify a theory that revolves precisely around an enigma, that of childhood, and posits the child as its central figure, the child that we, adults, once were. In other words, how could the figure of the child contribute to theory – or rather how does the child upset the adult world of theory? Additionally, how can the enigmatic be approached rather than from a position of mastery or, as Laplanche warns us, its exoneration as 'mysterious', 'inaccessible', or 'inexplicable'?[206]

Theory is not only linked with the mastery of enigmas, as Laplanche argues, but also with sight and seeing, or rather, theory becomes associated with mastery, inasmuch as it is associated with seeing. In *Lacan. The Absolute Master*, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen designates the history of Western philosophy as 'The Story of the Eye', and inscribes Lacan – or more specifically, Lacan's mirror stage – within that scopic tradition. Quoting Heidegger, Borch-Jacobsen underlines the etymological coupling between theory and seeing: 'The Greeks conceived knowledge as a kind of seeing and viewing, a state of affairs suggested by the expression "theoretical", an expression that is still common today. In it, the words *thea*, "view", and *horan*, "seeing" […], speak'. Additionally, Borch-Jacobsen points out that knowledge has been thought of in terms of vision and seeing, since being has been thought of in terms of presence and permanence. Indeed, as Heidegger writes: '[...] Because Being means presence and permanence, "seeing" is especially apt to serve as an explanation for the grasping of what is present and what is permanent'.[207] With particular reference to the Platonic Idea, Heidegger shows how *idea* acquires a double sense, that of Being and that of vision: 'according to Plato's doctrine, Being is idea, visuality, presence as outward appearance'; 'as visual, Being is presence, but at the same time is what man brings before the eyes'.[208] Consequently, following Heidegger's critique of the Cartesian cogito and the modern metaphysics of subjectivity, Borch-Jacobsen concludes that in the equation of Being as what is brought before the eyes 'begins the progressive transformation of the idea into perception and representation'.[209] As Borch-Jacobsen notes, in the Heideggerian critique of the Cartesian cogito, 'I think' means 'I represent myself' and ultimately 'I see myself'. In this respect, Heidegger insists on how 'every

[205] Laplanche, 'La psychanalyse comme anti-herméneutique', 250.
[206] Ibid. 257.
[207] Heidegger as quoted by Mikel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan. The Absolute Master* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1991), 53.
[208] Ibid. 53-4.
[209] Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan. The Absolute master,* 54.

"I represent [I pose before myself] something" simultaneously represents a "myself" [poses me before myself]'.[210]

Borch-Jacobsen claims that Lacan, despite his aspiration to break from 'any philosophy directly issuing from the cogito', prolongs and completes this specular line of thought. This is due to the fact that in the Lacanian mirror stage, where the formation of the ego takes place, the ego comes forth outside itself, represented and posited in front of itself.[211] For Borch-Jacobsen, 'The Lacanian ego is the ego as it theorizes itself, never as it feels itself or experiences itself'.[212] And yet, while Lacan inscribes himself into this specular tradition, he also reverses it. Firstly, the mirror stage itself, and the Imaginary Order that arises from it, problematizes the very notion of representation, underlining how every representation is essentially a mis-representation. Secondly, Lacan introduces and insists on the primacy of the letter and the Symbolic Order, in which representation is further problematized, since it corresponds to absence (the subject is represented insofar as it is excluded).

In the mirror stage, the child is caught up by its mirror reflection. The child recognizes itself in its specular image; but this recognition already consists in a mis-recognition, since the child that - in reality - feels itself fragmented, sees itself - in its image, its imago, as Lacan coins the term – whole. The Imaginary Order and the formation of the ego that arise along with the mirror stage consist of identification (the infant identifies with, and assumes, its specular image) as well as alienation (the self does not coincide with its image, yet the image becomes confused with the self). As becomes clear, alienation for Lacan does not mean that the subject is alienated from itself, but rather that the subject *is* alienated from its very beginning. In this sense, Sean Homer defines alienation as the fact that 'the infant's realization (in both senses of the term: forming a distinct concept in the mind and becoming real) lies in an-other place'.[213] According to Lacan:

> Le stade du miroir est un drame dont la poussée interne se précipite de l'insuffisance à l'anticipation – et qui pour le sujet, pris au leurre de l'identification spatiale, machine les fantasmes qui se succèdent d'une image morcelée du corps à une forme que nous

[210] Heidegger as quoted by Borch-Jacobsen*, Lacan. The Absolute master*, 54.
[211] Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan. The Absolute Master*, 56.
[212] Ibid. 57.
[213] Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 26.

> appellerons orthopédique de sa totalité – et à l'armure enfin assumée d'une identité aliénante, qui va marquer de sa structure rigide tout son développement mental.[214]

The term 'stage' should, firstly, be understood temporally. Yet, against its usual connotation, it should not be thought of as a precise period, a step or a phase in a process of development, but rather as a dialectic of projection and anticipation. Additionally, the term should be understood spatially, in the sense that the formation of the ego -the image of mastery and wholeness- takes place outside the self, as well as theatrically, in terms of a platform where the subject's drama of non-coincidence takes place. Indeed, in the formation of the ego, an irreducible and unbridgeable gap is introduced between the subject and the ego, its image, which will further reoccur in the subject's relations with the external world (people and things). As we read in 'Le Stade du miroir*'*:

> le point important est que cette forme [that is, the subject in the mirror stage, the *je-idéal*] situe l'instance du moi, dès avant sa détermination sociale, dans une ligne de fiction, à jamais irréductible pour le seul individu, – ou plutôt qui ne rejoindra qu'asymptotiquement le devenir du sujet, quel que soit le succès des synthèses dialectiques par quoi il doit résoudre en tant que je sa discordance avec sa propre réalité.[215]

Consequently, the Imaginary is delimited by Lacan as visual (inasmuch as it is the realm of images), fictive (inasmuch as it is illusory) and haunting (inasmuch as it has real effects on the subject's life). Additionally, it becomes synonymous with immobility, similarity and identification, since the subject constantly attempts to appropriate and invalidate (his/her) otherness, in order to remain, in Malcolm Bowie's phrasing, 'what one is'.[216] As Bowie notes, 'the Imaginary is the scene of a desperate delusional attempt to be and remain "what one is" by gathering to oneself ever more instances of sameness, resemblance and self-replication'.[217]

In contrast to the Imaginary, the Lacanian Symbolic order is the realm of language, difference and movement. While the Imaginary rests on a dual logic (a dual relation between the self and its specular image), the Symbolic involves a divisional logic (a relationship of exclusion between the subject and the signifier). The Symbolic brings forth representation in terms of

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[214] Jacques Lacan, 'Le Stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je', *Écrits I*, 96.
[215] Ibid. Commenting on the passage, Jameson notes that it is not simply the mirror-image that is fictive (alienating), but that fiction, meant as fantasy and narration, plays a central role in the subsequent efforts of the subject to re-appropriate his/her alienated image. Fredric Jameson, 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan', 353.
[216] Bowie, *Freud, Proust and Lacan*, 92.
[217] Ibid.

absence, to the extent that the subject is represented in language by a stand-in: a personal pronoun ('I'), a name, a denomination ('daughter of')'. The subject is represented in, as well as excluded by, language, or rather how it becomes represented inasmuch as it becomes excluded. In this respect, the Symbolic corresponds to the coming-into-being of the subject as well as of the unconscious, as that reality of the subject which is excluded in and due to the process of naming and representation. The unconscious is both bound together with and repressed by language, as Lacan's emblematic phrase 'the unconscious is the discourse of the Other' attests. As Bowie puts it: '[the symbolic] is the realm of language, the unconscious and an otherness that remains other'.[218] And as he adds: 'it is a res publica that does not allow any of its members to be himself, keep himself to himself or recreate in his own image the things that lie beyond him'.[219]

The primacy and significance of the Symbolic as opposed to the Imaginary are put forward in Lacan's reading of Poe's Purloined Letter. In 'Le séminaire sur la « Lettre volée »', Lacan reads Poe's story as an allegory of the signifier.[220] In Lacan's reading, Poe's story is about the centrality of the Letter, since the subjects occupy their positions in relation to it (in Lacanian terms, Poe's story is about the symbolic as constitutive of subjectivity). In parallel, the story, for Lacan, discredits the act of seeing (upon which lies the imaginary), since, as the story shows, the best way to protect the letter from inquisitive eyes is to leave it in the open. In this respect, dramatizing an excess of visibility, the story undermines the assumption that what is not seen is hidden and subverts fantasies of hiddenness and unveiling. In Lacan's illustrious formulation, the story revolves around 'la politique de l'autruiche' and thereby brings together the ostrich (autruche), which by sticking its head in the ground sees (imagines) that it is not seen, whereas (in reality) is seen not seeing, the others (autrui) that constitute the intersubjective order of the Symbolic (the big Other) and Austria (Autriche), the birthplace of psychoanalysis.[221]

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[218] Bowie, *Freud, Proust, and Lacan*, 92.

[219] Ibid. 93. This otherness that remains other refers to the foreignness of language, since for Lacan language is an alienating structure that speaks us, rather than we – as an aesthetic of expression wants it – speak it. In parallel, it refers to the otherness of the desires of others, through which we learn to desire (to articulate our desire). In this sense, the conception (and emergence) of the unconscious as the 'discourse of the Other' conflates with the definition (and emergence) of desire as 'the desire of the Other', a definition which in the late Lacan points to the impossibility of desire (inasmuch as it is always a desire for something else). In the early Lacan (under the influence of Kojève), the phrase 'the desire is the desire of the Other' refers mainly to the desire of recognition (humans desire to be desired by others).

[220] Jacques Lacan, 'Le Séminaire sur *La Lettre volée*', *Écrits I*.

[221] Ibid. 15–6, 31.

Lacan's interest in the 'Purloined Letter' lies in the fact that it displays and coincides with the stakes of psychoanalysis. Or rather Lacan's reading of the story elucidates the points of contact between Poe's literary text and psychoanalytic theory as put forward by Lacan. Firstly, in Lacan's reading, Dupin's strategy demonstrates how the sender receives from the receiver his proper message in reverse form; this phrase correlates with Lacan's definition of the unconscious as the discourse of the Other, where the subject receives in the inverted form his own forgotten message. Secondly, Poe's configuration of 'The Purloined Letter', as a literary text that calls into question the notions of 'self' and 'analysis', inasmuch as, in Barbara Johnson's remark, it 'both analyzes itself and shows that it actually has neither a self nor any neutral metalanguage with which to do the analyzing' corresponds to the Lacanian demarcation of psychoanalysis not as a meta-language (a discourse of mastery) that speaks *on* or *about,* but as a language that enters *into* whatever it speaks of (as, for Lacan, it is rather the world of words that creates the world of things, rather than the inverse). In this respect, Poe's text – acting for literature – and Lacan's texts – speaking for psychoanalytic theory – do not simply create a dialogue of equals, showing how literature and psychoanalysis are mutually implicated, but throw into confusion a fundamental law according to which, as Girard puts it, all texts are divided into two categories: 'the ones that do the interpreting, and the ones that are there mostly to be interpreted'.[222]

Poe's story, in its progression, unsettles the (oedipal) desire to see, to know, to uncover, since the content of the letter is never revealed. As the story moves on, the letter itself moves, circulates, changes hands; constantly displaced, the letter goes missing again and again from its place. Finally, Poe's text involves a crucial shift: the mystery is solved and the letter is found, as the focus shifts away from the act of looking towards the act of repeating, as Johnson convincingly argues: 'Dupin finds the letter "in" the symbolic order *not* because he knows where to look, but because he knows *what to repeat*'.[223] Dupin's act crystallizes and parallels not only the psychoanalytic process but also psychoanalytic theory, in its shift from seeing to writing; a shift enacted by Lacan's numerous writings, several of which are collected and entitled as *'Écrits'*. Commenting on and arguing against one of the most common reproaches to psychoanalysis (reiterated by Derrida, in his critique of Lacan's reading of the Purloined

[222] René Girard, 'Narcissism: Demystified by Proust' in *Psychoanalysis, Creativity and Literature,* ed. Alan Roland (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 292–311 (308). Girard unsettles this law in his own way, showing how Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* offers a critique and a more complete vision of narcissism compared to Freud's essay on narcissism.
[223] Johnson, 'The Frame of Reference', 498 (emphasis in the text).

Letter), that psychoanalysis always finds itself in whatever it studies, Johnson promotes this denunciation to one of the most acute definitions of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, for Johnson, as the first occurrence of what has been repeating itself, revolving around an event that never took place as such, problematizes the terms of the 'event' and (its) 'repetition': 'psychoanalysis is not itself the interpretation of repetition; it *is* the repetition [of a trauma of interpretation]'; 'it has content insofar as it repeats the dis-content of what never took place'.[224] This discontent, the displeasure without content, is, for Johnson, an 'interpretative infelicity'. The (traumatic) event (the Real, in Lacanian terms) is and consists of a traumatic interpretation, an inability to understand which never properly took place. As a result, psychoanalysis proves to be, as Johnson writes, 'itself the primal scene it is seeking: it is the first occurrence of what has been repeating itself [in the patient without ever having occurred]'.[225]

The Lacanian enterprise could be sketched as a passage from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, from the *ego* (and illusions of wholeness) to the *je* (as split and divided), from theory (as an act of seeing) to writing (as an act of repetition). The entry of and to the Symbolic is, as Johnson points out, the entrance of difference, otherness, and temporality, into identity.[226] The entrance of difference, otherness and temporality recasts the notion of repetition (as the repetition of sameness) and renders it synonymous with the impossibility of equation (as in Poe's story, where the message is received in reverse form). Or, as Johnson puts it in numerical terms, the symbolic is 'the impossibility not of the number 2 but of the number 1 [...]; something which subverts not the symmetry of the imaginary couple but the possibility of the independent unity of any term whatsoever'.[227] In the Lacanian topology, what further disjoins the possibility of unity as well as the Imaginary and the Symbolic as an opposing and interdependent pair is the third Lacanian locus, the Real. The Real, as what precedes and exceeds phenomenalisation, language and subjectification, is a resistance to symbolisation. Yet, in its defiance of integration and symbolisation, in its approximation of the impossible and the ineffable, it exerts pressure on the Symbolic, setting it in motion.

As becomes evident, Lacan's return to Freud rewrites both the analytic process and psychoanalytic theory as primarily a relation to language. In his privileging and use of, his alliance and recourse to, the symbolic, as the order of movement, deferral, difference and irreducible otherness, Lacan shifts away from Freud's (hermeneutic) inclination towards

[224] Ibid. 499.
[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid. 469.

meaning –and the questioning of the relation between signifier and signified – and directs his attention to the (structural) relation between signifiers, along with the (unstructural) unstoppability of the signifying chain. Freud remolds theory, inasmuch as he yields at last to doubt, authorizing it to permeate the solidity and certainty of knowledge, as he writes to his friend Marie Bonaparte: 'I always envy the physicists and mathematicians who can stand on firm ground. I hover, so to speak, in the air'. On the contrary, Lacan's reward, despite – or precisely due to – his laborious refusal to stop, pause and be satisfied, is, as Bowie remarks, to become a writer and, hence, momentarily savour the relief of truth, in its most absolute incarnation as promised by Hegel:

> When the theorist has completed his long apprenticeship and travelled far along the *via negativa* that psychoanalysis recommends to all those who would presume to construct theories, he is eligible for his reward. In Lacan's case the reward is to become a writer, and in his writing to discover not the foothills of Truth but its delirious summits.[228]

Without deluding himself with Hegel's cognitive satisfactions, truth is glimpsed – and reconfigured – by Lacan as a rupture, in and as the delight of speech. In Bowie's words, '"Truth" of the kind that Hegel had foretold, breaks in upon him, momentarily relieves him of the need to say "always anOther thing", and breathes upon his writing an unmistakable air of bliss'.[229]

The momentary crystallisations of Lacanian truth can be discerned in his definitions, or rather his problematization, of 'existence'. From the viewpoint of the Symbolic, existence becomes synonymous with absence, since 'nothing exists insofar as it does not exist'. From the viewpoint of the Real, existence becomes synonymous with the impossible, since 'only that which is impossible to symbolize exists'.[230] The above depictions come into contact with the remolding of existence in terms of impossibility, as suggested by the Blanchotian and the Bataillean experience of literature. Yet, drawing on Shoshana Felman's remark that literature, in its connection to psychoanalysis, destabilises the assigned places (inasmuch as the literary critic in his/her relation to the text, analyzing the text, is, of course, the analyst as well as the patient, since the analyzed text, knowing more, becomes the 'subject supposed to know'), I want to suggest that Blanchot's contribution to Lacan's theory is a re-evaluation of the

[228] Bowie*, Lacan*, 120.
[229] Ibid. 121.
[230] This definition of existence in relation to the Real is given by Dylan Evans in *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 58.

'Imaginary' and the 'image'. Both Blanchot and Lacan depart from the philosophical conception of imagination as an ability (a faculty) and render it synonymous with the world and realm of images. Yet for Lacan, the image and the Imaginary are understood in terms of a disabling fixity which 'imprisons the subject in a series of static fixations', while for Blanchot, as we saw in the previous section, the image becomes synonymous with movement and withdrawal.[231] Additionally, while for Lacan the imaginary is defensive and protective (protecting us from the Real), the Blanchotian Imaginary might be considered as an opening towards the Real as designated by Lacan. Indeed, whereas the Lacanian image leads back to and reassures the 'I' (the 'eye', the ego), the Blanchotian image opens to the not-I, to the indivisibility and anonymity of the Lacanian Real. To put it a different way, for Lacan the image entails and sustains a dual relationship between the self and its specular image, while Blanchot advances the image as a tensional doubleness between the subject and its disappearance. In this respect, the imaginary, for Lacan, is synonymous with fantasy, inasmuch as it functions as a setting, a staging, a *mise en scène* and a fulfillment of the subject's desire towards unity and wholeness (that is, towards what the subject is not); the Blanchotian imaginary is an exposure to the dispersal of the subject as it sinks to the anonymity of the language of literature.

Additionally, Lacan's analysis of Holbein's 'The Ambassadors' suggests to some extent how the impossible – and one's relation to it – is configured differently in the literary and the analytic endeavour. The painting as well as Lacan's reading of it, while revolving around and insisting on the obliqueness of a register, nevertheless calls for another point of view, albeit ec-centric; the literary undertaking, on the contrary, scatters and withhold the possibility of any point of view whatsoever. In Lacan's reading of 'The Ambassadors', the painting exemplifies how the subject's existence is sustained upon a fundamental relation of obliquity and suspension with the subject's annihilation, as the latter is symbolized in the skull. The annihilating subject that grasps and understands the world, as portrayed in the assertive pose of the two majestic figures, is undercut by a residue of knowledge that is impossible for the conscious subject (or, in Sartrean terms, the subject of consciousness). Lacan's analysis focuses on the fact that, due to this strange distorted object that appears in the foreground, the viewer, who equally enjoys the certainty of being a subject in control of his/her looking, in the attempt to decipher this strange object, that turns out to be a skull, finds himself being watched. Therefore, the viewer's eye is caught by the skull that somehow looks back at the viewer.

[231] Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 83.

Therefore, for Lacan, I who look (who looks at the painting) find myself under a gaze, I am looked upon: 'nous verrons alors se dessiner [...] le regard comme tel, dans sa fonction pulsatile, éclatante et étalée […]; ce tableau n'est rien d'autre que ce que tout tableau est, un piège à regard'.[232]

While most Lacanian critics emphasize the incompatibility between the two scopic regimes glossed by Lacan as the eye (l'œil) and the gaze (le regard), the painting nevertheless invites the viewer to position and situate oneself properly in order to face (look towards and accept) this oblique register of death (the fact that s/he is looked upon): 'nous retournant, nous voyons ce que signifie l'objet flottant magique. Il nous reflète notre propre néant, dans la figure de la tête de mort'.[233] Similarly, psychoanalysis, in its claim that the subject might – and must – position itself properly towards and reconcile with the obscurity of its desire (which is somehow death-bound), calls for an analogous confrontation. Though Lacan revolts against the bourgeois dream of happily settling within reality and puts forth a relation of ongoing confrontation (contra mundum), and thereby Lacan should constantly be defended against his appropriation by ego-psychology (in the latter's emphasis on the subject's normalization and social rehabilitation), in psychoanalysis, in blunt terms, there is a goal and there is a way (albeit strenuous). The goal and the way consist of a double realization, which is summed up by Critchley as the realization of the unrealizable of our desire and of the fact that we are, fundamentally, beings of lack, lacking *in* being: 'In Lacanian terms, sublimation is the realization of one's desire, where one realizes that one's desire will not be realized, where one realizes the lack of being that one is'.[234]

As the stakes of psychoanalysis, and its *raison d'être*, are crystallized in terms of an itinerary from the 'Es' to the 'Ich', the psychoanalytic subject, in its subjection to the symbolic order, is put forward – that is, both constituted and celebrated – as split (rather than whole and unitary).[235] Against the analytic route from the 'Es' towards the 'Ich', the last chapter will focus on the itinerary of literature in terms of a movement from the 'je' to the 'il', for Blanchot, and

[232] Jacques Lacan, 'L'Anamorphose', in *Les Quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*. Texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 102.
[233] Ibid. 107.
[234] Critchley, *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity*, 202.
[235] On how Lacan reinterprets the famous Freudian proclamation 'Wo Es war, soll Ich werden', see Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychonalaysis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 12. Ragland-Sullivan underlines how in Lacan's return to Freud, the announcement does not mean that the conscious subject (the Ich) replaces the unconscious subject (the Es) but rather that it emerges from it: 'Freud's formula means that it is one's duty to emerge from a place of unconscious being to recognize the truth, that one's being derives from having been an object of unconscious and alien principles'.

as a series of disguises, for Bataille, and via the tropes of the ‘neuter’, with reference to Blanchot, and the ‘mask’ with reference to Bataille, will attempt to advance a more radical dispersal and defiance of subjectivity, reality and relationality.

PART III: (RE)TURNS

« *– Mais pourquoi deux ? Pourquoi deux paroles pour dire une même chose ?*
– C'est que celui qui la dit, c'est toujours l'autre ».
(Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*)

Throughout his work Maurice Blanchot never tires of restating – never tires of repeating – that 'to write is to pass from the I to the he'. This definition of writing as the downfall of subjectivity is first found in his 1940's collection, *La Part du feu,* with particular reference to Kafka. In his seminal essay 'Kafka et La littérature', Blanchot considers the passage from the 'I' to the 'he', namely from the personal to the impersonal, as the defining characteristic of the literary: 'Kafka [a] éprouvé la fécondité de la littérature (pour lui-même, pour sa vie et en vue de vivre) du jour où il a senti que la littérature était ce passage du *Ich* au *Er*, du Je au Il'. He goes on to bring in the theme of Kafka's state and *expression* of unhappiness, and adding to literature's dimension of impossibility (alluded to in the previous chapters) its signaling the transition from the 'I' to the 'he':

> Il ne me suffit pas donc d'écrire : *Je* suis malheureux. [...] Ce n'est qu'à partir du moment où j'arrive à cette substitution étrange : *Il* est malheureux, que le langage commence à se constituer en langage malheureux pour moi, à esquisser et à projeter lentement le monde du malheur tel qu'il se réalise en lui.[1]

There are two remarks to be made at this point concerning the occurrence of the 'he'. The first is that the overthrowing of the 'I' is described in the respective terms of a 'passage' and a 'substitution'. The second is that the occurrence of the 'he' in place of the 'I' brings together another language and another world (a language that is unhappy and a world of unhappiness). In other words, writing puts a triple pressure on received notions of subjectivity, language and, ultimately, reality. Against the conception of writing in terms of the stream of consciousness that renders possible immediate presence (though, in reality, this immediacy is artificial inasmuch as it is *mediated* through writing), the Blanchotian conception of writing presents itself as – and imposes – the suspension of presence. As will be shown in the discussion that follows, writing, for Blanchot, brings forth a logic of doubleness that disperses the possibility of ontology – the opening of a horizon – as well as the logic of dialectics – the promise of closure due to the equation of negativity with work.

[1] Maurice Blanchot, 'Kafka et la littérature', *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 29.

The definition of writing in terms of a passage to the third person is given again in Blanchot's major work of the 1950's, namely *L'Espace littéraire*, and is explicitly interrelated with anonymity and repetition: 'écrire [...] c'est passer du Je au Il, de sorte que ce qui m'arrive n'arrive à personne, est anonyme par le fait que cela me concerne, se répète dans un éparpillement infini'.[2] To put it another way, the passage from the 'I' to the 'he' is not simply a replacement (simply a substitution) but a more profound transformation, inasmuch as the 'he' is actually a no-one, bringing on a language that no-one speaks, addressed to no-one, which reveals no-thing. Additionally, as is emphasized in *L'Espace littéraire*, this passage does not obey a logic of continuity but of discontinuity. In this regard, it is described in terms of a break, destruction and withdrawal. To write, for Blanchot, is to untie the bond between words and the world, between words and myself, between myself and you (I and you). In his phrasing, 'écrire c'est briser le lien qui unit la parole à moi-même, briser le rapport qui, me faisant parler vers « toi », me donne parole dans l'entente que cette parole reçoit de toi [...]; écrire, c'est en outre, retirer le langage du cours du monde […].'.[3] In the essay 'La Voix narrative' of *L'Entretien infini*, Blanchot's major work of the late 1960's, the definition of writing in terms of a passage reoccurs with explicit reference to *L'Espace littéraire*. Having sufficiently secured the definition of writing in terms of the impersonal 'il', while providing a laconic definition of the 'il' as 'l'événement inéclairé de ce qui a lieu quand on raconte', Blanchot declares that 'il reste à savoir ce qui est en jeu, quand écrire répond à l'exigence de ce « il » incaractérisable'.[4] The aimof this chapter is to show precisely how the key term of the 'neuter' and the major leitmotif of the neutral, both fully explored in *L'Entretien infini* succeed, firstly, in providing a more precise characterization of this uncharacterizable 'he' and, secondly, in demonstrating what is at stake when writing.

The recurrent motif in Bataille's thought is a longing for return, which echoes the Nietzschean device of eternal recurrence in its attempt to disengage life (and thought) from being future directed. In (anti-)Hegelian and (anti-)Heideggerian terms, the motif of return eschews both the aspiration to represent the totality of the world as well as the attempt to disclose an original moment. Bataille's dark eroticism, dark due to its inseparability from death, does not aspire to posit sexuality as predominant nor to appoint death as an all-encompassing force. The erotic and the deathly, Eros and (as) Thanatos, two of the most predominant and pervading themes of the Bataillean universe, cannot be considered apart from a yearning for return, inasmuch as

[2] Maurice Blanchot, 'La Solitude essentielle', *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 31.
[3] Ibid. 20–1.
[4] Maurice Blanchot, 'La Voix narrative (le « il », le neutre)', *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 558.

they designate a movement from discontinuity (the separateness of individual beings) towards continuity (a state, or rather an ec-static mode, where individuals escape the confinements of their limits and merge into the limitlessness from which they have emerged). Yet, this return is neither to be thought of in terms of retrieval (of a prior, initial, antecedent origin, which is recovered), nor in terms of revelation (of a newly found origin, which is to be laid as a foundation), but rather in terms of overturning (that is, as a problematization of the very idea of origin).

In our previous chapters on Bataille, we have already looked into a series of overturnings, which, despite their thematic divergence, testify to the insistent recurrence of the gesture of reversal as a way of problematizing the logic of origin and foundation. In Part I (adopting the viewpoint of economy), I demonstrated how discharge is asserted as constitutive of life and, thereby, expenditure and loss are considered as primary, while production and acquisition as secondary operations. In Part II (adopting the viewpoint of ethics), I focused on the primacy of the present and the valorization of the instant's intensity against the future and that which lasts. In this way, I showed how Bataille brings forth pleasure (designated as the surrender to the present, and hence as a sovereign moment where existence obeys nothing outside itself) against work (designated as the care for – and hence the subordination of existence to – the future). In this last part (adopting the viewpoint of art and history, or more precisely pre-historic art), with particular reference to Bataille's text *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, in which the celebrated Greek miracle is overthrown and displaced by the miracle of Lascaux, I will bring in a third reversal which concerns the birth of art and humanity. As Bataille puts it: 'à Lascaux, ce qui, dans la profondeur de la terre, nous égare et nous transfigure est la vision du plus lointain'; and as he adds: 'ce n'est pas tellement du miracle grec que nous devrions parler désormais mais du miracle de Lascaux'. [5] Going further back (in the depths of time) and further down (in the depths of a cave), decentering the luminosity and radiance of the Greek miracle with the chthonic site of Lascaux, Bataille's text on Lascaux emphasizes how humanity is concurrently affirmed and disguised *in* (not behind) animal masks. In doing so, it suggests disguise and masking as constitutive and sheds light on what Bataille is trying to do in writing. This last section, by way of the trope of the mask, in the case of Bataille, and the 'neuter', in the case of Blanchot, will show how writing is governed (that is, bound to and overridden) by a fundamental duplicity, which denounces both dualism and the logic of the one. Yet, as the terms chosen indicate, in their common fight against oneness and duality, Bataille opts for the

[5] Georges Bataille, Préface, *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, *OC IX*, 12, 9.

striking, the flagrant, whereas Blanchot directs his attention to the unremarkable, the featureless.

Chapter 7
Blanchot: turning and reveiling[6]

« – Toute recherche est une crise. Ce qui est cherché n'est rien que le tour de la recherche qui donne lieu à la crise : le tour critique ».
(Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*)

The reoccurring definition of writing in terms of a passage that runs through Blanchot's works from the 1940's to the 1970's seems to invite Roger Laporte's insightful remark that Blanchot, like all great writers, always says – passes (spends) his life trying to say– 'qu'une chose', one and the same thing. Additionally, against what I suggested with reference to the occurrence of the neuter in *L'Entretien infini*, Laporte warns us against any deceitful impression that this one and same thing can be approached by a specific text – even less, that it can be adequately articulated by a specific term. Briefly, Laporte suggests that this one thing that Blanchot keeps telling us permeates the entire Blanchotian oeuvre, without it being localized or crystallized somewhere – be it a text or a notion: 'Comme tout grand écrivain, Blanchot ne nous dit qu'une chose, ou plutôt il passe sa vie à tenter de la dire, mais le lecteur a parfois l'illusion que tel texte est celui où ce qui cherche à se dire est dit au plus près [...]'.[7]

Challenging Laporte's remark, or rather further developing and filling it in, Leslie Hill singles out Blanchot from other major thinkers, such as Lévinas or Heidegger, precisely because Blanchot's thinking cannot be assembled 'in one central intuition, thought or concept'.[8] This is due to the fact that Blanchot, as Hill underlines, 'never has only one idea, but always two' and 'these two are never reducible to attributes of the one'.[9] Thus, Hill suggests that Blanchot's constantly recurring main consideration is a 'commitment to doubleness', that is, 'to that which is more than One, or otherwise than One'.[10] This resolute and recurrent commitment is, for Hill, formulated in *L'Entretien infini* as the 'twofold task of "naming the possible, responding to the impossible"'.[11] Drawing on both Hill and Laporte, in what follows, I will show how the

[6] The term 'reveiling' appears in Blanchot's definition of the image in *L'Entretien infini* in terms of the veil that reveals by reveiling: 'l'image est [...] le voile qui révèle en revoilant'. Maurice Blanchot, 'Parler, ce n'est pas voir', *L'Entretien infini*, 42.
[7] Roger Laporte, 'Le Oui, Le Non, le Neutre', in *Critique*, 229, 1966 (juin), 579–90 (582).
[8] Leslie Hill, 'After Blanchot', in *After Blanchot. Literature, Criticism, Philosophy*, eds. Leslie Hill, Brian Nelson, Dimitris Vardoulakis (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 1–12 (1).
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid. 2.
[11] Ibid.

Blanchotian key term of the 'neuter' – which appears throughout *L'Entretien infini* – is the one and recurrent idea that permeates all of Blanchot's works, precisely inasmuch as it names and responds to an irreducible doubleness.

Blanchot's definition of writing in terms of a 'passage' and the definition of the latter in terms of breaking the bond with the world is analogous (similar in some ways, starkly different in others) to the bracketing posed by the phenomenological *epoché*. Both notions have in common a gesture of suspension; yet, they radically differ with regard to what is suspended and the outcome of suspension. The Husserlian *epoché* is and calls for a suspension of reference to the empirical world according to the 'natural attittude'. The existence of the external world and of its objects – if any – is bracketed and emphasis is given on the subject, or more precisely on the existence of the world as experienced (that is, both perceived and intended) by the subject. This emphasis on subjective experience results in equating being with appearing and in rendering the bodily self the anchor and the producer of meaning. The free subject, freed from the external world, becomes the site (and the guarantor) of the continuous *flow* of lived experience. The phenomenological first-person point of view and the flowing of experience within the self is precisely what is interrupted by the Blanchotian contrivance of the 'passage', a passage which consists of moving away from the 'I' and the world towards impersonality and worldlessness. Blanchot's account of the neuter in terms of 'passage' and 'substitution', suggests, in contrast to Husserl, a third person point of view (rather than a first) and indicates the suspension of the world, worldly identity and linguistic meaning (rather than a suspension of the natural attitude). Additionally, contrary to Levinas (but mainly the Levinas of *Totalité et infini*, 1961), this third person point of view is not that of the other (*autrui*) but that of no-one.[12] To put it another way, the double logic of the neuter succeeds in *not* relocating transcendental subjectivity to a conception of the other in terms of transcendence.

The logic of the double, in terms of an initial division, was already displayed in the key term of the previous chapter, the image, where I showed how the becoming image of a thing – requiring its absenting – suspends the understanding of being in terms of presence and calls for a different understanding, where things both are and are not. The image attests to the fact that

[12] The Blanchotian suspension within – and challenging of – the transcendental character of subjectivity can be compared to the Levinasian concept of 'substitution', which is both a key term and the name of one of the core chapters of Levinas' major work *Autrement qu'être ou Au-delà de l'essence* (1974). Substitution, as developed by Levinas, is a radicalization of Husserlian *epoché*, inasmuch as it refers to a first experience of alterity, an 'alterity within', and attempts to think intersubjectivity in non-dialectical terms and, more crucially, relationality in terms of immanence.

absence is not derivative of, but actually partakes in, presence, as the very possibility of figuration. As Blanchot notes, coming back to the notion of the image in *L'Entretien infini*, 'l'image est image en cette duplicité, non pas le double de l'objet, mais le dédoublement initial qui permet ensuite à la chose d'être figurée'.[13] Contesting the understanding of being in terms of presence, manifestation and unveiling, the image points to and brings forth the world of the imaginary, where the prevalent terms are absence, withdrawal and obscurity. Yet, the demand to which *L'Espace littéraire* responds, via the contrivance of the image, is the unworking of presence, visibility and of the hiatus between contact and distance, while the demand to which *L'Entretien infini* responds, via the contrivance of the neuter, is that of otherness. Therefore, it is in this late work that the logic of the double, as the suspension of the one, acquires its full force. In this sense, as has been noted by critics, while *L'Entretien infini* continues some of the Blanchotian preoccupations articulated throughout the 1940's and the 1950's, it also marks a turning point, as the question of otherness acquires an urgency and a centrality it did not have in Blanchot's previous works.

Alongside the prominence of the neuter, one needs to point to a shift from 'literature' to 'writing' in the lexicon of *L'Entetien infini*, as the terms littéraire', 'littérature', 'œuvre' that figure in the early essays of the 1940's and, of course, in *L'Espace littéraire* in the 1950's are dropped in favour of the terms 'écrire', 'écriture'. Additionally, while the earlier works can be distinctly situated within the theoretical field as critical essays, Blanchot's later works of the 1970's and 1980's, with their fragmentary writing, waver undecidably between theory of literature and literature. Yet, as far as Blanchot's conception of literature is concerned, this shift is more reflective of the Derridean (post)structuralist paradigm of 'écriture' than a substantial change in his own thinking. Blanchot's main shift from literature to writing (that is, in Bident's phrasing, from a conception of literature in terms of revelation, towards a conception of writing in terms of contestation) can be traced back to the 1940's.[14]

It is in the 1940's as well that Blanchot's preference for Kafka over Thomas Mann is revealed – a preference that can be seen as indicative of Blanchot's rejection of an understanding of culture from a conservative cultural standpoint. While the early Blanchot of the 1930's, the

[13] Blanchot, 'Parler, ce n'est pas voir', 42.

[14] Bident locates this shift from the 1940's onwards and notices the role of Bataille in it (that is, the conversation between Bataille and Blanchot out of which Bataille's *L'Expérience intérieure* emerged) as he writes: 'what first of all needed to happen was little short of a veritable Copernican Revolution: the move from a classical conception of literature as revelation to a modern conception of writing as contestation; this was what was at stake in the debate with Bataille'. Christophe Bident, 'Movements of the Neuter', transl. Michael FitzGerald and Leslie Hill, in *After Blanchot. Literature, Criticism, Philosophy*, 13–34 (26).

Blanchot of *L'Insurgé,* still attached to and motivated by the cultural and political conservatism with which he was raised, reviews one of the volumes of the *Josef und seiner Brüder* tetralogy, from the 1940's onwards it is Kafka who becomes the major and recurring reference in all Blanchot's major works.[15] As already mentioned, it is with reference to Kafka that Blanchot's definition of the literary in terms of a passage to the impersonal is formulated and developed (from the 'Kafka et la littérature' essay in *La Part du feu* to 'La Voix narrative' essay in *L'Entretien infini*).

In the case of Thomas Mann's novels, there is an aspiration to literary greatness due not only to Mann's personal aspiration to become a great man, write great books and be a dominant intellectual figure of German culture, but also, and more crucially, due to the aspiration of his novels, especially of *Joseph and His Brothers,* which is reviewed by the young Blanchot, to provide a myth for modern times. *Joseph and His Brothers*, providing a historical version of the biblical story, removing it from biblical times (timelessness) and relocating it within the historical world of ancient Egypt, rewrites and re-enacts the stories of the Genesis into the lives of responsible individuals and, thereby, exemplifies and attests not only to a belief in the human capacity to find the path and thrive in the modern world, but also in literature's ability to provide a response in the crisis of modern times where everything solid melts into air. Kafka's novels, on the contrary, inhabited by characters unable to find their way (in the world or even out of it), offer a view of literature which, far from providing a response to the modern deadlock, is enfolded in it and emerges as wounded.

Thus, the turning point of *L'Entretien infini* does not refer to the question of literature but rather to the question of otherness, inasmuch as the other – though a central concern which informs all Blanchot's post-war writings – is displayed more prominently in it. While literature in *L'Espace littéraire* is suspended between being and non-being, in *L'Entretien infini* it is constituted, as I will show, in and by its detour, as always other to itself, undoing thereby every attempt to confine existence in terms of identity, sameness, unity and origin.[16]

[15] Maurice Blanchot, 'Notes de lecture sur *Joseph et ses frères* de Mann', *L'Insurgé*, nº 38, 29 septembre 1937, 5.
[16] On the contrary, in Kevin Hart's theological reading of Blanchot there is a crucial turning point in *L'Entretien infini* as it shifts from the lexicon of the imaginary that dominates *L'Espace littéraire* to a lexicon of transgression and, thereby, implicates a different kind of 'beyond'. For Hart, while *L'Espace littéraire*, in its emphasis on the imaginary, points towards (and is interested in) what is beyond reality, possibility and negativity, *L'Entretien infini*, calling attention to contestation and transgression, points towards what is beyond history (the history of meaning), that is, for Hart 'the infinite God, a deity beyond all dialectic'. See Kevin Hart, 'The Counter-spiritual Life', *The Power of Contestation* eds. Kevin Hart and Geoffrey H. Hartman (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 169–71 (177).

The logic of the double: to find is to turn

In his essay dedicated to Blanchot and entitled 'La Pensée du dehors', Foucault traces the difference between two simple but crucial assertions: 'I lie' and 'I speak' (with the latter amounting to 'I write'). For Foucault, while the first makes Greek truth shudder, the second puts modern fiction on trial. As he notes, in the opening lines of the essay, 'La vérité grecque a tremblé, jadis, en cette seule affirmation : « je mens ». « Je parle » met à l'épreuve toute la fiction moderne.'[17]

My intention is not to read the divergence between these two statements as a recurrence of the old dispute between literature and philosophy, a dispute as old as ancient philosophy itself inasmuch as it appears already in the Platonic dialogues. I intend rather, following Foucault, to direct my attention to how their divergence involves a twofoldness of a different sort. Framing both the question of representation (crystallized in the axioms of philosophy 'I lie', 'I think') and presentation (crystallized in the statement of literature 'I write') in terms of duplicity, Foucault shows how writing puts forth a different kind of duplicity, a duplicity which moves beyond the dual logic, the binary logic of 'I think', 'I lie', bringing forth the logic of the double.

The essential duality of the paradox 'I lie', says Foucault, concerns the non-coincidence, the split, between the announcement and its content/object (I say – the truth – that I lie). This essential duality derives from the fact that the subject *who* speaks is the same as the subject *about* which it speaks. Contrary to 'I lie', which is self-defeating, 'I speak' is self-assertive. In its exact coincidence, in its self-reference, the statement 'I speak' (and I say that I speak) is undeniably true. But, continues Foucault, while as a formal proposition, 'I speak' raises no problems, its *meaning* raises a variety of questions, inasmuch as it has no other object, no other content than itself (which is precisely what secured its truth). Providing the meaning of 'I speak' ('I speak' crystallizing modern literature) – its definition, consequences and significance[18] – Foucault writes: 'Bref, il n'est plus discours et communication d'un sens, mais étalement du langage en son être brut, pure extériorité déployée';[19] 'le « sujet » de la littérature (ce qui parle en elle et ce dont elle parle), ce ne serait pas tellement le langage en sa positivité, que le vide où il trouve son espace quand il s'énonce dans la nudité du « je parle ».'[20] The raw

[17] Michel Foucault, 'La Pensée du dehors' in *Critique,* 229, 1966 (juin), 523–46 (523).
[18] The question of meaning could be formulated as follows: what is meant by these two words 'I speak', what do I mean when I speak, what is the meaning of speaking when the sovereignty of speech lies in the deficiency of an object (other than itself)?
[19] Foucault, 'La pensée du dehors', 524.
[20] Ibid. 525.

state of language, its void and nakedness mentioned by Foucault, designate the dissociation of speech (of 'the speech of writing', to use a Blanchotian term) from content as well as from communicative exchange.

In this sense, for Foucault, the case of writing, the statement 'I write', in its self-reference, cannot any longer be understood in terms of an 'essential duality', as is the case with telling the truth (or lying about the truth), but in terms of a 'redoublement' (a doubling back).[21] This doubling back, far from resulting in the solidification of language, brings about its dispersal, since language, in its self-reference, approaching itself, gets away from itself (that is, its conception as meaningful discourse). To put it another way –and to bring in the term of 'the outside' that appears in Foucault's title– in its interiorization, language passes towards the outside (that is, outside the discourse of representation). Having no object, language becomes intransitive. 'I speak', as opposed to 'I lie' (which is always a lying about, always in request of an object), involves a displacement from an object to a movement. This movement can be thought of in terms of a turn, a detour, a folding: the assertion 'I speak', having no object, folds back upon itself (to find itself naked and void); turning towards itself, it turns away (from the traditional conception of discourse).

In Foucault's essay, the dispersal of language is coupled with the dispersal of the speaking subject. The initial opposition of 'I lie', 'I speak', is brought together with the opposition of 'I think', 'I speak'. For Foucault, unlike the self-evidence of 'I think', the self-coincidence of 'I speak' proves perilous. While the thought of thought leads to the deepest interiority and brings the certainty of the I and its existence, the speech of speech (the being of language), in its passage to the outside, brings the effacement of the I. Hence, concludes Foucault, 'sans doute est-ce que pour cette raison que la réflexion occidentale a si longtemps hésité à penser l'être du langage: comme si elle avait pressenti le danger que ferait courir à l'évidence du « Je suis » l'expérience nue du langage'.[22] It is in this nakedness that lies the aporetic logic of writing for Blanchot or, more precisely, the experience of aporia which deposes the subject and being from their conception as univocal or of the order of the 'possible'.

In this sense, the Blanchotian exclamation 'I write', as endorsed by Foucault, distances itself both from the Heideggerian self-representation of the artwork (in its celebration of a beginning, an opening, an origin) and the Hegelian end of history/end of the story (in its celebration of the

[21] Ibid. 524.
[22] Ibid. 525.

ending, completion, termination). Writing does not found or find itself, it merely turns upon itself (to find itself missing). In this sense, the logic of the double as set forth in writing is that of an internal doubling. Yet, internal, against what the term traditionally defines, does not mean interior, it means not external, that is, an essential part. Similarly, doubling (*redoublement*, in Foucault's terminology) is not to be understood as a secondary distortion (of an initial identity), but as an inherent part of the act of writing as it turns back upon itself (to find the deficiency that constitutes it).

In one of the opening sessions of *L'Entretien Infini* ('Parler, ce n'est pas voir'), Blanchot makes the link between finding and turning. As he notes, the initial meaning of finding has nothing to do with a goal, a result and stopping (stopping since a result has been found). Rather than a stop, a halt, to find involves movement. Rather than a goal, a result, it involves searching. To find, 'trouver' in French (from the Greek *trepein*, that is, to turn) is to take a turn and to make something turn. The initial definition of trope (from the Latin *tropus* and the Greek *tropos*) is a turn – and hence a way, a manner, a style, according to Blanchot: 'Trouver, c'est tourner, faire le tour, aller retour. Trouver un chant, c'est tourner le mouvement mélodique, le faire tourner'.[23]

In the same section, Blanchot raises the demand of a speech where things exist in their 'non-truth', which, as he goes on to add, would mean that things are neither unveiled or veiled, neither visible or invisible, neither showing themselves nor hiding (in other words, not showing is not equated with hiding): 'il y a une parole où les choses ne se cachent pas, ne se montrant pas. Ni voilées ni dévoilées : c'est là leur non-verité'.[24] The (anti)phenomenological resonance of Blanchot's endeavour contests not only the Heideggerian conception of death as one's ownmost possibility, but also Merleau-Ponty's equation of the manifest world as being on the 'carte de ce que je peux'.[25] The speech of writing, for Blanchot, breaks (and should break) from the optical metaphor (lexicon) that has permeated phenomenological thought and the history of the novel. The privileged viewpoint of the novel lies in that speech presents itself not simply as another way of seeing, but as a superior and transcendent way of seeing (that has the possibility of surpassing the limits of the common experience of seeing). According to

[23] Blanchot, 'Parler, ce n'est pas voir', 35.
[24] Ibid. 41.
[25] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'esprit* in *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 1594. The whole phrase reads as follows: 'Tout ce que je vois par principe est à ma portée du moins à la portée de mon regard, relevé sur la carte du « je peux »'. On the dominance of the visual in our tradition and Maurice Blanchot's place in challenging this, see Ian James, 'Lucidity and Tact' in *Lucidity*, Ian James and Emma Wilson (eds.) (Oxford: Legenda, 2016), 9–19.

Blanchot: 'le romancier soulève les toits et livre son personnage au regard pénétrant'.[26] Speech, therefore, becomes '[...] une vue affranchie des limitations de vue. Non pas une manière de dire, mais une manière transcendante de voir'.[27] Against the configuration of literary speech in terms of the possible (in terms of a privileged viewpoint, absolute vision, namely, ultimate possibility), Blanchot puts forward a reconfiguration of speech in terms of the impossible. Indeed, Blanchot gives rise to a narrative voice (in both his *récits* and his essays) that does not enjoy the privileged viewpoint of the omnipresent narrator, the viewpoint of absolute and resolute possibility that renders possible the impossible (lifting the roof and seeing everything from all sides). Instead of longing for access to (and rendering possible) an impossible point of view, in his *récit L'Instant de ma mort*, Blanchot's theory of narration emerges, with its insistence on the significance of turning (going around against unveiling) and folding (against unfolding). In what follows I will juxtapose this with Benjamin's monumental essay on narration 'The Storyteller'.

In his melancholic essay the 'Storyteller', Benjamin, who celebrated the dismantling of the aura of the artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction, pays tribute to and extols the virtues of the aura of storytelling. While providing several definitions and identifying the distinguishing features of the extinct art of storytelling, Benjamin repeatedly designates death as the source and the birthplace of stories: 'death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death'.[28] For Benjamin, stories are rooted in death and death bestows authority on storytelling, not because the question of death is their central theme, but because real life, which is the material of stories, is grasped and becomes graspable at the moment of death: 'it is [...] characteristic that not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his entire life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death'.[29]

In the above-cited fragment, Benjamin makes three distinct but interrelated claims about stories, death and life: the first is that narrative, and more crucially, narratability, the governing law of the narrative, are not thematically but constitutively bound to the moment of death. The second is that the end (the human end, actual death) allows the beginning (the beginning of narration) since the ending confers meaning (the meaning of life). The third is that the meaning of life conferred by death is understood in terms of unity and entirety: what the end offers, and

[26] Blanchot, 'Parler, ce n'est pas voir', 40.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller' in *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 93.
[29] Ibid.

what is grasped due to the end, is the unity of an entire life, life in its entirety. In this regard, Benjamin appropriates and amends – slightly but crucially – the phrase 'a man who dies at the age of thirty-five is, at every point of his life, a man who dies at the age of thirty-five'.[30] Setting right the sentence and placing the man's life and death in the past, Benjamin brings forth the end as determinant. Therefore, in his rephrasing, the man's life, fastened in the past, is seen in retrospect and the sentence becomes: a man who *died* at the age of thirty-five is, at every point of his life, *remembered* as a man who dies at thirty-five.In comparison with Benjamin's philosophical chronicle of narration, accompanied by his emphasis on the existential stakes of the narrative in its interrelatedness with death, the radical reversal in Maurice Blanchot's very short narrative *L'Instant de ma mort* (1994) is that it emerges from and revolves around a death that does not take place. Blanchot's last book – in Lacoue-Labarthe's expression, 'his testamentary book and legacy' ('[son] livre testamentaire') – recounts a death that does not occur.[31] In this sense, death is not the constitutive element, the enabling condition of the story, but (in)directly its main theme – indirectly, since death is depicted by the story as essentially evasive. In opposition to Benjamin's thesis that life is the stuff of stories, Blanchot seems to make the claim that death is the stuff of his story and of writing. Moreover, the evasiveness of death (against its positing as an ending point) renders life ungraspable as well as evasive. To phrase it in Benjamin's terms but to reverse his statement, since death is not posited as an ending point, life, in its turn, cannot assume transmissible form.

A reasoning similar to Benjamin is adopted by Sartre, in his attempt to trace the difference between living and narrating. Contemplating the mode of being of the phrase '«Je me promenais, j'étais sorti du village sans m'en apercevoir, je pensais à mes ennuis d'argent »', Sartre, or more precisely Antoine Roquentin, the troubled protagonist of Sartre's *La Nausée*, points out the significance of the end.[32] The end of the novel functions as the guarantor of meaning of the phrase – or rather of the situation described in the phrase: 'mais la fin est là, qui transforme tout'.[33] Indeed, the end transforms the banality and triviality of the situation into a story that is worthy of our attention. While the man is a hundred miles from adventure, in the story he is the hero of the story ('pour nous, le type est déjà le héros de l'histoire').[34] Commenting on the above passages and on the 'sense of an ending' as determinant, Peter

[30] Ibid. 99.
[31] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'La Contestation de la mort', *Le Nouveau Magazine Littéraire* 424 (2003/10), 58–60 (58).
[32] Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 65.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

Brooks underlines that while in real life, moments like those recounted in *La Nausée* (walking absorbed in one's thoughts and troubles), happen –and are lived– in a haphazard and disorderly way, since the future (that will illuminate and reveal their significance) is not yet there, in the narrative these seemingly unimportant moments are already caught up by the end of the story, 'enchained toward a construction of significance' and are thereby lived and read 'as annunciations and promises of final coherence'.[35] In a similar manner to that of storytelling, the unity of life is grasped and offered by the novel, since a novel's beginning and composition entails – as a constitutive requirement – the end of the novel (figurative death).

In this regard, Sartre accedes to a long philosophical tradition according to which the endless, the unending, is synonymous with meaninglessness. Against this tradition and against Sartre, for whom the specificity (and privilege) of narrating lies in its ability to stand in the end, adopt the viewpoint of the end and, hence, start backwards, whereas life falls prey to and disintegrates under the 'not yet', Blanchot renders the 'not yet' the space of literature. Against the Sartrean view that narrative, *unlike* life, starts from the end, while life hovers in the 'not yet' (as the end is not yet there), for Blanchot, writing, *like* life, like death, inhabits the not yet, in its double connotation of the interminable and the undecidable. In his commentary on *L'Instant de ma mort*, Lacoue-Labarthe provides a definition of writing 'in its major sense'.[36] As he suggests, writing is not about life, or a way of living; it is rather about death, a way of dying. In his words, 'la « leçon » de *L'Instant de ma mort*, son legs testamentaire si l'on veut, est d'affirmer qu'écrire [...] ce n'est pas raconter […] comment l'on vit ou comment vivent les autres, ce qui revient au même. Mais c'est dire comment l'on est mort'.[37] In an attempt to sketch out what to recount 'how one has died' might consist of, Lacoue-Labarthe notes that it entails a double shifting. The 'I am' shifts to an 'I am no longer', 'I never have been'. This first shift is accompanied by a second, more crucial one: the transition from a position of amazement and admiration to a sensation of puzzlement, defeat and ravage. Briefly, I am no longer 'surprised or enraptured' by the fact that I am; I am rather 'devastated and overwhelmed' by the fact that I am no longer (I never have been).[38]

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[35] Peter Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot: Questions of Narrative' in *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 283. As we read in *La Nausée*: 'Et nous avons le sentiment que le héros a vécu tous les détails de cette nuit comme des annonciations, comme des promesses, ou même qu'il vivait seulement ceux qui étaient promesses, aveugle et sourd pour tout ce qui n'annonçait pas l'aventure. Nous oublions que l'avenir n'était pas encore là ; le type se promenait dans une nuit sans présages [...]', *La Nausée*, 65–6.

[36] The expression 'écrire au sens majeur', as Lacoue-Labarthe notes, belongs to Roger Laporte.

[37] Lacoue-Labarthe, 'La Contestation de la mort', 58.

[38] Ibid.

Blanchot's *L'Instant de ma mort* – mainly written in the third person but largely autobiographical, as the title, the concluding lines and some elements in and outside the text indicate – has as its theme the inexperienced experience of death, an experience of death as impossible and interminable.[39] It draws on a young man, suggestively Blanchot himself, brought before a firing squad during World War II and then suddenly released from his near death. As we read in the opening lines of the narrative: 'Je me souviens d'un jeune homme – un homme encore jeune – empêché de mourir par la mort même [...]'('I recall a young man prevented from dying by death itself').[40] The incident is again described, or rather brought into question, a few lines later in the following formulation: 'La rencontre de la mort et de la mort ?'. Therefore, in Blanchot's narrative, the incident of death becomes an incident of life, the end proves unending, and death is not constitutive of subjectivity but belongs to anonymity (as the surrounding omnipresence of catastrophe and the execution of three young boys whose names are not given attest). Or, to phrase the above in Blanchotian terms, death (*la mort*, the possibility of death) is replaced, or rather doubled, by 'dying' *(mourir*, the impossibility of death). And death's double, the impossibility of death, sends back to the infinity of existence. In this sense, Blanchot's narrative gives rise to a notion of return which challenges the usual understanding of it.

For Benjamin, the importance of the novel and the uniqueness of the storyteller lie in their ability to return, reach back, unfold an entire (a complete) life and thereby disclose its meaning. This disclosure, unlike the coldness and unconcern that characterize knowledge and information, is endowed with warmth, consumption and flame. Additionally, the existential underpinnings of reading and storytelling are emphasized, as Benjamin writes, from the viewpoint of the novel and the reader:

> The novel is significant [...] not because it presents someone's else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.[41]

[39] Maurice Blanchot, *L'Instant de ma mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002). The book was initially published in 1994 by Fata Morgana.
[40] Blanchot, *L'Instant de ma mort*, 9.
[41] Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', 100.

Additionally, from the viewpoint of the storyteller, praising his distinctiveness and accounting for his unique aura, Benjamin writes: 'The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. This is the basis of the incomparable aura about the storyteller […]'.[42]

The storyteller's life is not simply transformed into his story but is dissolved and consequently completely absorbed by it. Unlike the novel, which follows a linear logic (inasmuch as the end is posited as the ending point), storytelling seems to comply with a circular logic (inasmuch as it involves a return that brings – and should be understood as – a completion of a circle). Storytelling joins the part-whole relation characteristic of the hermeneutic circle: the spirit of the whole is discovered and obtained through the individual and, conversely, the individual is grasped through the whole. To put it another way, the individual and the whole, life and stories, can only be understood in reference to each other.

In Benjamin's account, through the recourse to the novel and storytelling, the Heideggerian conception of being as a confrontation with finitude ('being-towards-death') is both repeated and essentially renounced. At first glance, Benjamin's essay seems to accord with Heidegger's view that the meaning of life is revealed in and through death, since death renders a lifetime complete (be it the lifespan of a person, or that of a story). But Benjamin's 'Storyteller' diverges crucially from Heidegger in two ways. Firstly, with regard to the reader, Benjamin points out that this fundamental relation to death is experienced not through a focus on one's own death, as one's ultimate and ownmost possibility but, conversely, through the death of others. As he indicates, this is precisely what draws us to reading: the promise of warmth of our shivering lives through a death we read about (in other words, reading offers an affectionate response to our finitude). Contrary to Heidegger's assertion that death is non-relational, since no one else can die in our place, for Benjamin it is through exposure to the death of others – an exposure occurring precisely through reading – that death is experienced (be it the figurative end of the novel or the actual death of a novel's character). Secondly, with regard to the storyteller, Benjamin's underscoring of the centrality of death is different to Heidegger's, since the storyteller's relation to death is understood not in terms of a free decisive projection, but in terms of a consumptive retrospection. Unlike the Heideggerian projective call of *being-towards* and his conception of being as 'being-towards-death', Benjamin's storyteller enacts – through narrative – a retrospective relation that consists in a *reaching back*.

[42] Ibid. 107.

Against this framework, Blanchot's narrative suggests a relation to the end (death) that is neither projective nor retrospective, neither anticipatory nor consumptive/redemptive; it brings forth a relation to the end that is double, untying thereby both dialectics and finitude. As the end is doubled by (its) non-ending, a double relation to the end is established. The end, the ending point, becomes a turn, a turning point. As the end becomes a turn, it does not bring or allow an unfolding (the unfolding of a complete life offered to understanding), but a folding (the folding of an incomplete life falling back on itself, as self-referring and self-deferring). Therefore, the turn is not only to be thought of in terms of a return and a detour, as turning towards and away, but also in terms of an original torsion, an initial division, a fundamental doubleness. Furthermore, a different relation between life and writing is brought forth: life is no longer the stuff, the material of stories; stories are not about a lifetime (or a shorter period within it) brought to an end (the end accrediting precisely the beginning of narration). Stories, like life, are unending; stories and life cease to exist in reference to each other – in a logic of absolute continuity – and are instead equated to each other. To put it another way, their relation is no longer one of transformation but of equation; yet this equation should not be understood in terms of a stabilizing equality and a balancing symmetry, but in terms of ceaseless – infinite – movement and dissymmetry.

The relation between writing and life might be thought of in terms of the Borgesian famous equation of the book with the world, and additionally, and conversely, of the world with a book. In the essay 'L'Infini littéraire : L'Aleph' part of the collection *Le Livre à venir* (1959), Blanchot, suspecting Borges of having come upon the infinity – that is, the truth – of literature, notes that what is destabilizing in this 'innocent tautology' (of the book and the world) is the lack of a (stable) point of reference. The world and the book incessantly, dizzyingly, send to each other their reflected (and deflected) images, without either world having priority over the other, without either world acting as a (stable) point of reference for the other. It is precisely this infinite, interminable errance that is designated by Blanchot, via Borges, as the truth of literature (the truth as reconfigured by literature): 'la vérité de la littérature serait dans l'erreur de l'infini'.[43]

Blanchot elucidates that the distinguishing feature of the infinite, or rather what transforms the finite into the infinite, is that there is no exit and no stop. With regard to the impossibility of exit, he notes: 'du fini qui est pourtant fermé on peut toujours espérer sortir [...] ; [...] tout lieu

[43] Maurice Blanchot, 'L'Infini littéraire: L'Aleph' in *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 130.

absolument sans issue devient infini'. And with regard to the impossibility to stop, he notes: 'l'erreur, le fait d'être en chemin sans pouvoir s'arrêter jamais, changent le fini en infini'.[44] The reconception of truth as wandering is further developed and practised in *L'Entretien infini*, where the truth wanders, passes from speaker to speaker, without ever being retained or appropriated. In *L'Entretien infini* the truth as wandering becomes synonymous with the truth as always other.

In the Borgesian universe, the liquidation of a stable point of reference is coupled with the liquidation of the idea of origin. In this respect, Blanchot alludes to the fictional 20th-century French writer Pierre Menard who, reproducing, repeating phrase by phrase, an identical section of Cervantes' *Quixote*, creates a perfect double to the original text. What is disquieting in this identical production, or as Blanchot puts it 'dans cette identité qui n'en est pas une', is that it throws into confusion the very idea of identity (in its equation to the one). In other words, 'là où il y a un double parfait, l'original est effacé et même l'origine'.[45] In his own tribute to *Quixote* in *L'Entretien infini* (whose unparalleled originality as a created work lies in that it deliberately offers itself as an imitation), Blanchot brings in the theme of the double in terms of an initial doubling and an original torsion, as he alludes to 'un redoublement plus initial, celui qui précède et met en cause l'unité supposée de la « littérature » et de la « vie »'.[46] This unity of literature and life put into question should be considered both in terms of coherence (as the harmonious relationship/correspondence *between* literature and life) and in terms of oneness, the state of being one (the unity *of* literature, the unity *of* life). This unity is thrown into confusion by Cervantes' *Quixote* as well as by Cervantes himself.

The madness and extravagance of Quixote, whose life has been permeated by literature (by what he has read) is, says Blanchot, to abandon his library, become a character of action and live adventurously, as one does in books. Therefore, writes Blanchot, 'ce qu'il fait est toujours déjà une réflexion, de même qu'il ne peut être lui-même qu'un double, tandis que le texte où se racontent ses exploits n'est pas un livre, mais une référence à d'autres livres'.[47] For Blanchot, the madness of Quixote – the 'not reasonable', but 'nonetheless logical', madness of everyone who reads – is his trust in recounting and his belief that the truth of books might hold for life. To Quixote's logical madness, Blanchot introduces the asymmetrical (even greater) and dissimilar (illogical) madness of Cervantes. Cervantes is the reverse case of Quixote inasmuch

[44] Ibid. 131.
[45] Ibid. 133.
[46] Maurice Blanchot, 'Le Point de bois (*la répétition*, *le neutre*)', *L'Entretien infini*, 570.
[47] Ibid. 569.

as, unlike his character '[qui] décide, [...], abandonnant sa bibliothèque, de vivre rigoureusement', going out in an attempt to put the life of books into practice,[48] Cervantes puts all his efforts into a book, doing nothing but writing without living ('c'est dans un livre encore qu'il s'évertue, ne quittant pas sa librairie et ne faisant rien, vivant, s'agitant, mourant, qu'écrire sans vivre, sans se mouvoir ni mourir').[49]

What interests Blanchot in the strange case of Quixote (and the even stranger case of Cervantes) is that a relation (between life and literature) is put forth that defies unity. Life is not transformed, turned into, a story, and stories, as the disenchanted Quixote realizes, do not reflect the reality of life. Yet, this does not mean that literature and life are cut off from each other; on the contrary, their relation is one of mutual implication and entanglement, which can be thought of in terms of an original torsion.

The logic of the neuter: neither/nor

In *L'Entretien infini*, in the footnote of the section entitled 'La Question la plus profonde', Blanchot designates as the most profound question the questioning of the 'One'.[50] Accommodating Levinas' criticism of all Western philosophies as philosophies of the Same, he criticizes and equates, despite their differences, Hegelian dialectics, Heideggerian ontology and the critique of ontology, inasmuch as all three are based on and conclude with the postulate of the one: 'L'Un, le Même restent les premiers, les derniers mots. Pourquoi cette référence à l'Un comme référence ultime et unique ? En ce sens, la dialectique, l'ontologie et la critique de l'ontologie ont le même postulat : toutes trois se remettent à l'Un'.[51] And Blanchot goes on to enumerate the different ways in which the above systems of thought reinforce the idea of the one, incorporating otherness under the promise of the whole or the Absolute or on the premise of gathering, light, unity : 'soit que l'Un s'accomplisse comme tout, soit qu'il entende l'être comme rassemblement, lumière et unité de l'être, soit que par-delà et au-dessus de l'être, il s'affirme comme l'Absolu'.[52] Therefore, concludes Blanchot : 'ne faudrait-il pas dire : « la question la plus profonde » est la question qui échappe à la référence de l'Un ? C'est l'autre question, question de l'Autre, mais aussi question toujours autre'.[53]

[48] Ibid. 568.
[49] Ibid. 569.
[50] Maurice Blanchot, 'La Question la plus profonde', *L'Entretien infini*, 33–4.
[51] Ibid. 34.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

There are three remarks to be made here: firstly, the insistent questioning of the One marks Blanchot's difference from Heidegger, especially the late Heidegger, who insists on the intimacy, the association and the interchangeability between being and oneness (ὄν, ἕν).[54] Secondly, the questioning of the One overlaps with but is not the same as the question of the Other; it goes together but does not coincide with it. In doing so, it also marks, as we will see, Blanchot's divergence from Levinas. Thirdly, as always in Blanchot, this question is, and is posed as, the question of writing. In this sense, the question of 'the other' is a demand not only set forth in the first sections of *L'Entretien infini* but also, and more crucially, a demand responded to throughout the numerous pages of this immense work.

In the introductory note of *L'Entretien infini*, Blanchot, alluding to the exigency of writing, repeats his earlier definition of writing, as it appeared mainly in the 1940's, in terms of a contestatory force. Additionally, he provides a definition of writing as an anonymous and dispersed way of being in relation. Among the many things that writing challenges, Blanchot includes the Truth and the One (to which we could add the conception of the Truth as one, and the idea of the one as the Truth). The passage reads as follows:

> *l'écriture qui dégage des possibilités tout autres, une façon anonyme, distraite, différée et dispersée d'être en rapport par laquelle tout est mise en cause, et d'abord l'Idée de Dieu, du moi, du Sujet, puis de la Vérité et de l'Un, puis l'idée du Livre et de l'Œuvre […] écriture qu'on pourrait dire hors discours, hors langage.*[55]

As Blanchot suggests, the contestatory force of writing ends up contesting not only the notion of the one (through the notion of the other), but also the way of being in relation, since the very notion of the other demands an-other way of being in relation. In this respect, the key-notion of the 'neuter', namely Blanchot's way of thinking about and addressing alterity, is advanced not only with reference to the subject and reality (as the dispersal of subjectivity and worldhood) but also in terms of another language (neutral speech) and another way of relation (the neutral relation as a relation of a third kind which goes beyond both dialectical progression and mystical fusion). Additionally, the neuter is the Blanchotian response to, as well as a reworking of, the Levinasian 'autrui' (where alterity is restricted to the unconceptualizable radical alterity of the other person).

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[54] For the late Heidegger: 'Oneness makes up beingness. And oneness here means: unifying, originary gathering unto sameness of what presences'. Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 138.
[55] Maurice Blanchot, 'Note', *L'Entretien infini*, vii.

Although *L'Entretien infini* begins by evoking the term 'autrui', its dropping in favour of the neuter offers Blanchot's singular approach to the question of otherness and marks his divergence from Levinas (inasmuch as it neutralizes the relation of transcendence). For Blanchot, one might say, our subjection to the other, as Levinas demands, is still tied up in a logic of subordination and dominance. In the Levinasian demand of ethics as the first philosophy, the other (the second of traditional philosophy) comes first, while in Blanchot's elaboration of the other in terms of the neuter, the other is what alters (what makes other) the one. Blanchot distances himself from the absolute priority of the other person (autrui) in place of (instead of) oneself, as he remarks: 'la souveraineté est en l'Autre qui est le seul Absolu. Et l'autre, dans ce cas, n'est encore qu'un substitut de l'Un'.[56] To put it another way, a critique of the Levinasian *autrui* from a Blanchotian standpoint is that the priority of the other against subjectivity still remains within the framework of dialectics inasmuch as it still rests on reconciliation – albeit the reconciliation (our reconciliation) with the absolute primacy of the other against the self (ourselves) – and as transcendental subjectivity is relocated to a conception of the other in terms of transcendence. Put somewhat schematically, as in Levinas's thought alterity is overemphasized, the other is what transcends relation, whereas Blanchot's aim is to find an-other way of relating. This other relation, which is the relation to the other, is radicalized in *L'Entretien infini* as '[un] rapport neutre, rapport sans rapport', a double relation (doubly asymmetrical).[57]

The logic of doubleness is at first set up in *L'Espace littéraire* under the contrivance of a 'double death' and, consequently, of a 'double relation to death'. The theme, or rather 'the strange project', of the double death ('l'étrange projet ou la double mort') is defined in the following terms: 'non pas la certitude de la mort accomplie, mais « l'éternel tourment de mourir »'.[58] In a more lengthy passage, a more analytical description of the notion of the double death is provided and a double relation to death is instituted, as both possible and impossible:

[56] Blanchot, 'Le Rapport du troisième genre', in *L'Entretien infini*, 95. Similarly, in *L'Écriture du désastre* (1980), Blanchot expresses his reluctance to accept the absolute priority of the other and asks: 'si moi sans moi je suis à l'épreuve (sans l'éprouver) de la passivité la plus passive lorsque autrui m'écrase jusqu'à l'aliénation radicale, est-ce à autrui que j'ai encore affaire, n'est-ce pas plutôt au « je » du maître, à l'absolu de la puissance égoïste, au dominateur qui prédomine et qui manie la force jusqu'à la persécution inquisitoriale ?' Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 37–8.

[57] Blanchot, 'Le Rapport du troisième genre', 104. For two re-readings and critical approaches to Levinas through Blanchotian lenses, see: Simon Critchley, *Very Little … Almost Nothing* (London: Routledge, 1997, 2004), 94–7 and Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot. Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 102–5, 107.

[58] Maurice Blanchot, 'L'Œuvre et l'espace de la mort', *L'Espace littéraire*, 129, 150.

> il y a comme une double mort, dont l'une circule dans les mots de possibilité, de liberté, qui a comme extrême horizon la liberté de mourir et le pouvoir de se risquer mortellement – et dont l'autre est l'insaisissable, ce que je ne puis saisir, qui n'est liée à *moi* par aucune relation d'aucune sorte, qui ne vient jamais, vers laquelle je ne me dirige pas.[59]

The redoubling of death, as death turns into the impossibility of dying, can be seen in the fate of Kafka's characters, whose story and torment lie precisely in their inability to die. The space of death that they inhabit is sketched not in terms of the end as definite, but in terms of the endless time of dying. In Blanchot's words, '[…] c'est dans l'espace de la mort que les héros de Kafka accomplissent leurs démarches, c'est au temps indéfini du « mourir » qu'ils appartiennent'.[60] One thinks here of the dead Hunter Gracchus who finds out that his death does not after all consist of a peaceful end (a final termination of and deliverance from existence), but of carrying on, wandering eternally over the seas. Or of the peculiar destiny of Gregor Samsa who causes great distress to his family not when he finally dies (which is a relief for the family), but when he refuses to do so and turns into an insect. In his earlier essay 'La Lecture de Kafka', Blanchot has described Gregor Samsa's state as 'l'état même de l'être qui ne peut pas quitter l'existence'; and his existence as his condemnation 'à retomber toujours dans l'existence'.[61] By the same token, Blanchot finds the end of the story ('[l'] appel à la volupté sur lequel le récit s'achève') as the climax of horror, inasmuch as it certifies that 'il n'y a pas eu de fin, l'existence continue'.[62] *The Metamorphosis* ends with Gregor's sister awakening to life and her turning into, despite the hardships of her family and the paleness of her face, a pretty girl who, as her parents think, might be in need of a husband. According to Blanchot's commentary on the ending, 'il n'y a rien de plus effrayant dans tout ce conte. C'est la malédiction même et c'est aussi le renouveau, c'est l'espérance, car la jeune fille veut vivre, et vivre c'est déjà échapper à l'inévitable'.[63] In this sense, the early Levinas of *De l'existence à l'existent* (1947) desperately exclaims, repeating Baudelaire's phrase that anticipates the claustrophobic Beckettian universe: 'Demain, hélas!, il faudra vivre encore';[64] or, as Critchley

[59] Ibid. 129–30 (emphasis in the original).
[60] Ibid. 112.
[61] Maurice Blanchot, 'La Lecture de Kafka', *La Part du feu*, 17.
[62] Ibid. 18.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Emmanuel Lévinas, *De l'existence à l'existent*, 102, as quoted by Critchley, *Very Little … Almost Nothing*, 70.

puts it, 'But what if tomorrow does not bring death but only the infinity of today, the irremissibility of an existence one is unable to leave?'.[65]

The displacement brought about by the term 'dying' can be thought of with reference to another limit, that of the limited forces that limit life, as the theme of weariness that invades the beginning of *L'Entretien infini* reminds us. In the case of weariness, the limit, rather than compromising the integrity of life, becomes an integral part of life: in other words, the limit is displaced from the outside towards the inside, it is not a limit of life but a limit within life. In the phrasing of *L'Entretien infini*, in the preliminary dialogue that follows the introductory note and precedes the main text, the main dialogue: '±± *Pourquoi donne-t-il le nom de fatigue à ce qui est sa vie même ?*'.[66] Moreover, as Blanchot argues in his essay 'La Lecture de Kafka', the complexity and subtlety of Kafka's universe (the experience not only of Kafka's characters but also of Kafka himself) lies in its depiction of existence not only as dreadful and interminable (dreadful inasmuch as it is interminable), but as primarily indeterminate: 'nous ne savons pas si nous en sommes exclus (et c'est pourquoi nous y cherchons vainement des prises solides) ou à jamais enfermés (et nous nous tournons désespérément vers le dehors)'.[67]

The double relation that is first established in *L'Espace littéraire* with reference to death reoccurs in *L'Entretien infini* with reference to life. Indeed, in *L'Entretien infini* the relation to the impossible depends primarily on existence. As we read in Blanchot's homage to Bataille and to the Bataillean key term of the impossible (one of the last words he made public, as Blanchot informs us):

> Il faut entendre que la possibilité n'est pas la seule dimension de notre existence et qu'il nous est peut-être donné de « vivre » chaque événement de nous-même dans un double rapport, une fois comme ce que nous comprenons, saisissons, supportons et maîtrisons […] en le rapportant à quelque bien, quelque valeur […], une autre fois comme ce qui

[65] Critchley, *Very Little … Almost Nothing*, 70.
[66] Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, xix. The displacement of the limit is born by the place and the staging of this preliminary dialogue. Bearing the double sign (±±), written in italics, it presents itself as a liminal text: as it has no title and it does not appear in the table of contents, it is not strictly speaking part of the book. Or rather, it questions its being part of the book, as it is both in and outside it, both belonging and not belonging, both a component and not a component of it. Additionally, despite its status as an interval, between the introductory note and the main text, it nevertheless is, and acts like, an introductory act: it opens the scene, initiates us to and sets the tone for the main conversation that follows, bearing its echo.
[67] Blanchot, 'La Lecture de Kafka', 17.

> se dérobe à tout emploi et échappe à toute fin […]. oui, comme si l'impossibilité […] nous attendait derrière tout ce que nous vivons, pensons et disons.[68]

Alongside this double relation, in *L'Entretien infini* the third term of the 'neuter' is brought about, which problematizes precisely the idea of Unity (the idea of the one). Christophe Bident, providing a brief definition of the neuter as 'neither the one nor the other, neither clear nor obscure', as well as its etymological origin from the Latin *ne-uter* (not either), neither this nor that, characterizes the term as one of Blanchot's crucial creative conceptual achievements. And while alluding to Deleuze's remark that the creation of true concepts is what makes a philosopher, Bident suggests that the contrivance of the neuter would suffice to render Blanchot a philosopher, he nevertheless adds that the neuter is not a concept either: 'for if the neuter is irreducible to the clear or the obscure, it is in the first instance because it is also irreducible to itself: broadly undefined, it does not present itself as a concept which is clear, or that clarifies, or that serves as a source of clarification'.[69] Yet, if the peculiar status of the neuter as a concept might bring into question Blanchot's adhesion to philosophy, the 'neuter' is indisputably what draws him to literature.

As critics have argued, the neuter, of course, is not a term invented by Blanchot though Blanchot proves incomparably inventive concerning its use and function, its workings and its unworkings. I prefer to briefly allude to the theme of the neutral *within* the Blanchotian oeuvre, since well before *L'Entretien infini* the theme of neutrality appeared in the early essays of the 1940's under the name of the 'il y a' (the key term that figured in Part I), a device which designated precisely the neutrality of being. The 'il y a', a term shared by Blanchot and Levinas, is a contestation both of the destructive force of Hegelian negativity as well as of the Heideggerian positing of Being. Against Hegelian negation, the 'il y a', the simple fact that 'there is', always already affirmed (the presence of absence as extreme affirmation, the extreme affirmation of the presence of absence) designates, contra Hegel, the impossibility of negation. Additionally, the 'il y a' recasts being as the neutrality of being. Against the Heideggerian ontological difference (the relation between Being and beings and the event of Being against beings), the 'il y a' (in Paul Davies' terms 'the Levinasian contribution to ontology that ruins

[68] Maurice Blanchot, 'L'Expérience-limite', *L'Entretien infini*, 307–8.
[69] Bident, 'The Movements of the Neuter', 13.

ontology') corresponds to the undifferentiated unity of being and remolds existence in terms of worldlessness, anonymity and neutrality.[70]

The neuter, on the contrary, has nothing to do with being or nonbeing; it responds to the question of the other. In doing so, while the 'il y a' serves to designate the impossibility of negation, the neuter designates the impossibility of the one. While the 'il y a' points to the unity of being, the neuter contests precisely the idea of unity and brings forth the multiple and the fragmentary. While grammatically the 'il y a' (there is) has an affirmative character, the neuter (neither this nor that) has an indeterminate character. More crucially, whereas the 'il y a' corresponds to the otherness of language, the preconceptual materiality (and singularity) of things before the cataclysmic event (the calamity) of their naming, the 'neuter' might be outside language (meant as the discourse of unity and identity) but is plural speech, the speech of writing (as anonymous and neutral). While with the contrivance of the 'il y a', Blanchot and Levinas join forces to problematize the Heideggerian question of being (to suspend and pass beyond the alternative between being and non-being), with the contrivance of the neuter Blanchot both addresses and problematizes the question of Levinasian otherness; the neuter therefore marks both Blanchot's proximity and his distancing from Levinas. It is in this sense that Timothy Clark provides a further definition of the neuter as 'neither Heidegger nor Levinas'.[71] For Clark, Blanchot's reconfiguration of language in terms of the neuter, which is the voice of no one, diverges both from Heideggerian *Dichtung* (and the conception of language as the saying – and the poetic gathering – of Being) as well as from Levinasian otherness (and the conception of language as a form of transcendence). Put differently, Blanchot does not impose another language, that of the neuter, against dialectical language (negativity) or against the language of ontology (being) but reconfigures the relation between the two languages in non-dialectical terms, as – rather than being opposed – they are bound together and the neuter – rather than being privileged – merely undermines, shadows, interrupts and disperses both Hegelian negativity and Heideggerian being.

The elusive chaarcter of the neuter can be signalled in its convergence with the everyday, that is, the every day's unobservability. In this respect, another difference between the neuter and the 'il y a' emerges: the 'il y a' corresponds more to a biblical, post-apocalyptic scene, while the neuter converges more with everyday life, whose constitutive trait is to be unperceived.

[70] Paul Davies, 'A linear narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the work of Levinas' in *Philosophers' Poets*, ed. David Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 42, as quoted by Critchley, *Very Little … Almost Nothing*, 65.
[71] Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, 107.

The ‘il y a’, inasmuch as it attests to the presence of absence, is (and invites us to – impossibly – experience) what exists (always has and will exist) without us, while the everyday is relational, as it is what we (always) see again. The everyday, as that which never happens for the first time but always again, more evidently brings forth repetition, whereas the ‘il y a’ attests to what is without beginning or end. In this respect, the ‘il y a’ (already there and still there) challenges both creation and destruction, whereas the everyday, as that which always already happens and to which we always already have access, more evidently challenges the beginning and excludes the possibility of access and the idea of creation.

In this chapter, directing our attention to the neuter as one of the prominent terms of *L’Entretien infini*, we have seen how, against all the semantic connotations of the neutral as of no particular kind or characteristics, and of neutrality as an impartial, disengaged position, as not taking sides in a dispute, the Blanchotian neuter breaks through as a distinct term, which contests what no philosophical system – despite their disagreements – has contested, namely, the order of the one as well as the conception of relation in terms of opposition, incompatibility or hierarchy. Thus, despite the common association of the neutral to the dispassionate, the neutral is precisely what empassions Blanchot about – nearly captivates him in – the space of literature. Picking up and singling out the neuter as the most characteristic term of *L’Entretien infini*, we have seen how it is bound up in with the less noticeably displayed but nevertheless pervasive throughout all parts of *L’Entretien infini*, and more largely throughout Blanchot’s entire œuvre, logic of the ‘double’. Indeed, all the prevalent terms of *L’Entretien infini*, namely fragmentation, multiplicity and repetition, can be delineated under the constellation of the ‘neuter’ – a term whose defining particularity is its adherence to (and its enactment of) a double logic against wholeness, duality and unity and of a double relation against the dialectics of progression, recognition and reconciliation or the hierarchy of the ontic-ontological difference. In this respect, the neuter advances a relation of radical horizontality (rather than a hierarchical relation), a shifting and disjunctive movement (rather than a progressive movement). In the end, one might say that the neuter eventually has a neutralizing function: in its association with the double it tones down the Levinasian predominance (and burden) of otherness, and in its affinity with the everyday it counteracts the Bataillean preference for (and fostering of) the limit(less) in terms of the extreme.

Chapter 8
Bataille: returning and masking

La vie humaine ne peut suivre sans trembler – sans tricher – le mouvement qui l'entraîne à la mort. Je l'ai représentée trichant – louvoyant – dans les voies dont j'ai parlé.
(Georges Bataille, *L'Erotisme*)

Il y a donc le 1 et le 2, le simple et le double. Le double vient *après* le simple, il le multiplie *par suite*. […] [J] amais la discernabilité absolue entre l'imité et l'imitant, ni l'anteriorité de celui-là sur celui-ci, n'auront été déplacées par un système métaphysique.
(Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination*)

Among the various readings of *Histoire de l'œil*, two of the most insightful commentaries are those of Patrick ffrench and of Michel Leiris. The first insists on its visual dimension and underlines the broader project of dislocation it sets out, while the second focusses on its temporal dimension and reads the story as a vacuum in time. Despite their dissimilarities, as the former provides a more structural close reading (zooming in, magnifying the chopping of the eye and raising broader questions of visuality and form), while the latter a more thematic reading (construing the cut as a cut in time and linking this vacuum with holidays and childhood), both show how Bataille, in his first novel, distances himself from any idea of origin, as what truly counts is subversion (of vision) and disruption (of time). In his seminal study dedicated to the novel, *The Cut. Reading Bataille's Histoire de l'œil*, ffrench advances a reading of it as a story of the desublimation of the visual, as a narrative which traces the eye's displacement downwards to the sexual parts. As he puts it: '"the 'story of the eye" is the story of an imaginary regression of the eye along a chain of displacements from its sublimated position within the corpus of the human'.[72] One can compare this regressive journey of the eye with the Deleuzian contrivance of 'bodies without organs', that is, without organization, as the eye, in Bataille's novel, is not relinquished but displaced, liberated, diffused. In Deleuzian terms, the eye is no longer part of an organism: as it escapes from the organization of the organism, it becomes transitory, sticks in the material reality of bodies and re-emerges through the sexual organs of Simone. Yet, this displacement, as ffrench throughout his book insists, is not to be confused with a replacement, as the latter would amount to an attempt to foreground the body, physicality or sexuality as an origin or a primary site. Instead, the story recourses to all means in order to make us see and realize the complete absence of firm ground, fixity and stability - which is why urination also comes in, as a process of liquification that attacks and

[72] Patrick ffrench, *The Cut. Reading Bataille's Histoire de l'œil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32.

dismantles solidity, inflicting a vision of the world as flux. Sharing, and quoting, Krauss' view as expressed in her *Optical Unconscious*, ffrench claims that the task of desublimation is, in principle, to unform: 'to knock meaning off its pedestal, to bring it down in the world, to deliver it a low blow'.[73] To put it another way, the process of desublimation of the privileged organ of cognition and perception does not aspire to replace one ideal with another.

Michel Leiris, on the other hand, in his short article entitled 'Le Temps de Lord Auch', while not ignoring that in the novel the recurrent and major attack and assault is against the eye as the most eminent and lofty organ, reads this festival of misbehaviour as he calls *Histoire de l'œil* ['ce festival du dérèglement et de l'insulte aux idoles'] as bound to childhood and holidays. Noting that in this frenzied festival only one character is an adult, he puts forward a reading of the novel as a story of irreducible (unrestrained) child-like and endless holidays:

> Par quelque flamme qu'ils soient rongés et à quelque noirceur qu'atteignent finalement leurs actes, le fait c'est que les héros […] demeurent empreints d'une irréductible gaminerie, à travers des tribulations qui sont impossibles à situer ailleurs que dans une période des grandes vacances.[74]

Drawing on Leiris' remark and pushing it further, one can argue that the definition of literature as a return to childhood ('la littérature, c'est l'enfance retrouvée'), as it appears 20 years later in *La Littérature et le mal* is anticipated and set (staged) in Bataille's first book (which can be read as a reverse coming-of-age story). Yet, as both childhood and holidays depart from their conventional meaning, the Bataillean return resembles more a break, a rupture, a fissure. In both Bataille's book and Leiris' commentary, childhood and holidays designate a vacant and unoccupied period, a breach in time rather than a definable period within time (opposed, and thereby complementary, to adulthood and work). Indeed, childhood is not considered to be the beginning of a lifetime, an initial phase located back in the past, but rather as a leap out of time, as a time of absolute, and hence terrifying, leisure.[75] Similarly, holidays are literally meant as time off and acquire the sense of a vacancy, a vacuum, a radical break in time. In this sense, the returns launched in *Histoire de l'œil* (the return of the eye within the body and the return to

[73] Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 157, as quoted by ffrench, *The Cut*, 21.
[74] Michel Leiris, 'Du temps de Lord Auch', *L'Arc* 32*,* 1967, 6–15 (15).
[75] Leiris also renders childhood synonymous with amusement, adding right away how, against the tamed version of entertainment in modern culture (where entertainment is complementary to work – a break in order to return to work reenergized and work more efficiently) – the latter for Bataille is outrageous and terrifying. In Bataille's definition of amusement as quoted by Leiris 'l'amusement est le besoin le plus criant, et bien entendu, le plus terrifiant de la nature humaine'. Ibid.

childhood) are rather to be considered as reversals, overturnings (of the primacy of sight, of the order of the world). This chapter will look into how this recurring movement of returning and overturning, which the critics have remarked on, is bound to an unappeased demand for truth and, thereby, how truth is requalified in terms of a radical withdrawal, masking and doubling.

It may at first sound paradoxical to suggest that Bataille's thought, a thought that renewed the intellectual scene by privileging experience against understanding, positing the unknowable and the excessive against the knowable and measure, imposing base materiality as a considerable matter for thought – briefly a thought whose distinctive mark is the preference of exposure and an aversion to mastery – is driven by a commitment to a question as old and worn out, as used and misused and as closely associated to the tradition of metaphysics as that of truth. In this regard, as one might expect, the Bataillean truth, sharing the Nietzschean inheritance of dispiritedness, is neither liberating nor empowering: it is, merely and primarily, truthful (faithful) to existence as it is –or, to use more a Bataillean term, to existence in its nakedness (against the artifice of social conventions and intellectual constructions). In this way, one can contend that the truth that concerns Bataille is the truth of the body.

As the truth of the body is rendered the central axis, Bataille in *L'Erotisme* declares: 'l'action décisive est la mise à nu'.[76] Bataille has also announced that the act of denuding is registered on his thought: 'Je pense comme une fille enlève sa robe'.[77] Drawing on these preliminary remarks, in what follows, I wish to show how denuding proves decisive inasmuch as, dispersing all fantasies of revelation (and secrecy), it does not consist of the majestic power of the revelatory, but in the minimal act of laying bare. Additionally, and conversely, I want to show how the act of denuding can be thought of in terms of acting rather than action, and how masking becomes inflected with laying bare. In this way, I will bring in the mask as a useful term in order to approach how truth as put forward by Bataille consists of an irreducible doubleness, as it is distanced both from its conception in terms of correctness and correspondence (truth as a correct vision) as well as from its conception in terms of drawing the veil and bringing into the open (truth as bringing to light). In other words, for Bataille, there is neither representation nor presentation, as he does not aim for the unmediated transmission

[76] Georges Bataille, *L'Erotisme*, *OC X*, 23.
[77] Georges Bataille, 'Méthode de meditation', *OC V*, 200.

of truth (the fiction of truth), but rather points to the inevitable entanglement of truth with the fictitious (the truth of fiction).

Truth precedes – as a prefatory statement – several of Bataille's fictional texts. In a way that echoes Cézanne's famous promise to the younger artist, Emile Bernard, 'I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you', the prefaces of many of Bataille's texts announce a similar commitment. In both cases, the announcement has a double meaning: firstly, inasmuch as it is directed towards the interlocutor – the reader, in the case of Bataille, the young fellow craftsman, in the case of Cézanne – it makes a pact with, and a promise to, the addressee. Additionally, inasmuch as it is articulated with regard to art, it formulates and fosters the principle of alliance between truth and art – the art of painting, for Cézanne, the art of writing, for Bataille. Yet, if one takes a closer look at Cézanne's saying ('I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you'), one realizes that its meaning is rather dubious and slippery, which is precisely what urges Derrida to extensively comment on it. What is this 'truth in painting'? Is it to be told or to be painted? To put it another way, is it the truth *about* painting (on the subject of painting, what truly counts as painting) or is it the truth as it emerges *through* painting (as the subject of painting, truth as depicted by painting). Finally, should the promise be fulfilled – or, inasmuch as it is a promise, should its force and spell depend on its unfulfillment? If this is the case, one's duty might as well be to secure and guard the non-fulfilling of the promise (in a similar but inverse logic to that of the secret, whose existence and very condition of secrecy is enabled and sustained by disclosure –if not of its content, at least of its existence). As Derrida sums up the above: '*Cézanne a-t-il* promis, vraiment *promis*, *promis de* dire, *de dire* la verité, *de dire* en peinture *la verité* en peinture ? Et *moi* ?'.[78]

Drawing on Derrida's aporia, one feels the urge to ask: and Bataille? How does he position himself and his writings with regard to truth? Does he share Derrida's questioning and mistrustful attitude or does he take sides with Cézanne's decisive commitment to truth? On the one hand, it seems incomprehensible that the same Bataille who tirelessly denounced all the facets of metaphysical solace, who famously proclaimed 'Je vis d'expérience, et non pas d'explication logique', who celebrated, against duration and coherence, the elusive and the convulsive – in its visual, temporal and bodily manifestations, in blinding illuminations, the intensity of the instant and erotic spasms – does not simply use a term as scholarly as that of 'truth' but posits the will to truth as the precept of his writings. On the other hand, as Surya has

[78] Jacques Derrida, *La Vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), 14.

argued, Bataille is not a homogenous man: 'il n'y a pas *un* Georges Bataille tout entier révélé, livre après livre, homegène d'un bout à l'autre de son œuvre et de son existence'.[79] Yet, while taking this remark into account, I am not suggesting that there is a Bataille who denounces truth and another one who takes it upon himself; what I am trying to suggest is that despite – or precisely *in* – the heterogeneity of Bataille's thought, an enduring and persistent engagement to the search of truth can be detected.

The logic of the double: acting (what it is *like*)

In the preface of *Le Bleu du ciel*, his novel written in 1937, Bataille sketches out in a quite straightforward way the truth in literature in its double sense, as dissected above by Derrida with reference to painting and Cézanne. Indeed, we are told both what kind of truth counts *for* literature and what truly counts *as* literature: the interference of life is given as the criterion of truth, whereas the implication of constraint, the imperative to write, is given as the criterion of true literature. In the opening lines of the preface, Bataille announces that narratives reveal – and should reveal – 'la vérité multiple de la vie'. The whole phrase reads as follows: 'un peu plus, un peu moins tout homme est suspendu aux récits, aux romans qui lui relèvent la vérité multiple de la vie'.[80] Here, life's multiplicity is meant as life's vibrancy and not as the coexistence of multiple, various forms of life; or, to phrase the above in Deleuzian terms, Bataille here refers to zones of intensity that constitute (and destitute) life and not to the multiplicity of living forms, as the latter is simply another variant of the 'one'. Furthermore, as becomes clear further on, the truth of life for Bataille, far from being multiple, is rather unequivocal. The definition of literary truth in its second sense, that of true literature, is provided a few lines further on, formulated as follows: 'Comment nous attarder à des livres auxquels, sensiblement, l'auteur n'a pas été contraint?'.[81] Despite its interrogative form, the formulation is not to be taken as a question, even less as a hesitant suggestion; it is rather to be taken as a statement in its strictest sense. The fact – or rather the principle – according to which one does not freely choose to write but is forced to write is given in a quasi-aphoristic, almost dogmatic tone, as Bataille's general – or more precisely, his personal – truth about books. In this regard, Bataille clarifies, 'J'ai voulu formuler ce principe. Je renonce à le justifier'.[82] What

[79] Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille. La mort à l'œuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992, 2012), 111.
[80] Georges Bataille, 'Avant-Propos', *Le Bleu du ciel*, *OC III*, 381.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.

he provides us with is just a series of books that have moved him as a reader.[83] Despite Bataille's refusal to provide explanations for picking out the element of compulsion, his choice is justifiable by his widespread preference for experiences where agency is suspended, namely, experiences that, however willed or strived for, ultimately and essentially befall us, occur despite us (like fate), are given, rather than acquired (like grace), take hold of us and possess us (like religious or erotic ecstasy).

In the preface of *L'Impossible* the depiction of truth is again designated as the steadfast aim of the Bataillean project: 'comme les récits fictifs des romans, les textes qui suivent [...] se présentent avec l'intention de peindre la vérité'.[84] Additionally, desire and death are designated as the appropriate means for the attainment of truth, inasmuch as they suspend consciousness and throw identity into confusion: 'l'outrance du désir et de la mort permet seule d'atteindre la vérité'.[85] In (anti)Hegelian and (anti)Sartrean terms, desire and death show how we are not only subjects *of* desire but primarily subjected *to* desire, inasmuch as, far from fostering or imposing subjectivity, they ex-pose us, despite ourselves, to something other than ourselves. In the extremity of death and desire, subjects (or, in terms closer to the Bataillean lexicon, *les êtres vivants*) do not impose their will but become possessed and disarmed. In this respect, death is not to be understood in substantive terms, that is, in terms of decease or disappearance but in terms of a process, an operation (which defies both immediacy and mediation). Rather than actual death, this should be understood as an act of dying. Furthermore, the act that interests Bataille is neither (from an internal viewpoint) an act of consciousness – where what is negated appears as an object of consciousness – nor (from an external viewpoint) a worldly action – where the given is negated and a world, which was not, is created. In the preface of *Edwarda*, the undertaking is described in the following terms: 'l'être nous est donné dans un dépassement *intolerable* de l'être'.[86] Whereas for Hegel to exist is to act (negate the world as it is and transform it into something that was not), and for Heidegger, contra Hegel, possibility is valorized against actuality and action (to be is to let the world and beings be), Bataille, contra Heidegger, valorizes impossibility against possibility: to truly be, for Bataille, is to be outside

[83] Whereas truth in its joining forces with life recurrently appears in many of Bataille's prefaces, the definition of true literature appears only in the preface of *Le Bleu du ciel*. The coercive element, the Bataillean measure of true literature, while given as the distinctive characteristic of a writer, also involves the reader: what initially compels the author to the book (to write it), subsequently drives the reader to the book (to read it).
[84] Georges Bataille, 'Préface', *L'Impossible*, *OC III*, 101.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Georges Bataille, 'Préface', *Madame Edwarda*, *OC III,* 11.

of being. Human existence consists not in a privileged access to the world (as Heidegger's largely criticized anthropocentric vision asserts), but in getting out of the world.

The element of impossibility and outsideness, glossed again as the unbearable, is returned to decisively a few lines further in the preface of *Madame Edwarda.* Here, truth is resolutely designated as unbearable – unbearable to see, unbearable to know – and sight and vision, knowledge and thought are implicated only to be disarmed: 'que signifie la vérité [...] si nous ne voyons ce qui excède la possibilité de voir, ce qui est intolérable de voir, comme, dans l'extase il est intolérable de jouir ? si nous ne pensons ce qui excède la possibilité de penser … ?'[87]. As becomes evident, the Bataillean truth drifts towards the Lacanian real, which is precisely that against which reality –in all the constructions that make it up– protects us. Yet, if we accept the unbearable as the definition of truth (in its verging upon the real), the problem that follows is that of its access: how can the unbearable be born (be it from the viewpoint of subjectivity, by a human body, or from the viewpoint of art and literature, by a visual or a written form). If we accept the extremity of desire and death as the means of truth's attainment, as Bataille suggests, how are they to be endured? In other words, the desire of the separate individual to escape the confinements of individuality, however strong, cannot be considered apart from the struggle against the terror of losing oneself, as Bataille writes in *L'Erotisme*, 'mais sortant des limites, ou mourant, nous nous efforçons d'échapper à l'effroi que la mort donne, et que la vision d'une continuité par-delà ces limites peut elle-même donner'.[88] In this regard, as ffrench suggests, fear, anxiety and terror are not in front of (and due to) nothingness but in front of (and due to) metamorphosis, incessant movement, pure fluidity.[89]

As the human condition is rethought of in terms of a fundamental, unsurpassable contradiction, and the unitary subject becomes a torn subject – torn between the desire of being lost in continuity and the will to survive (go on living a discontinuous life) – the following question arises: as Kristeva would frame the problem, from the viewpoint of subjectivity, knowledge and eroticism, how can the encounter between the subject and *jouissance* (which throws the subject outside itself) take place? Or, in Deleuzian terms, and from the viewpoint of presentation, how can excessive presence be presented and how can invisible forces be rendered visible? In his book dedicated to Francis Bacon, Deleuze also raises the question of how sound could be painted, and conversely, how colours could be made audible. Thus, the

[87] Ibid. 12.
[88] Bataille, *L'Erotisme*, 139–40
[89] ffrench, *The Cut*, 54. As ffrench writes, terror is terror of the informe, that is, 'pure movement, pure flux without stasis'. The Bataillean key term 'informe' will be examined later on.

questioning of visibility/invisibility does not revolve around the limits of vision, neither is it an attack merely on vision; rather, it touches on, in broader terms, the forms of creation, if we exclude representation – and, in even broader terms, on the forms of relation, if we exclude mediation.

The section from *Madame Edwarda* quoted above, alongside the reformulation of truth in terms of the unbearable and the excessive, and the analogy between truth and the ecstatic, calls for the imperative to see it, to think of it, to know it. Truth, in its unbearableness, becomes a demand upon literature. As Surya says, 'insoutenable est cette vérité; [...] insoutenable doit être la littérature'.[90] In his book on Bacon, Deleuze makes a similar claim about painting. Repeating Paul Klee's aphorism that crystallizes the task of painting as '« non pas rendre le visible, mais rendre visible »', Deleuze underscores that the task of painting is to render visible the invisible ('invisible forces', in terms closer to the Deleuzian lexicon).[91] In the case of Bataille, that is, applied to the case of language and literature, the task is to approach silence, make silence speak. In the essay 'Molloy's silence', Bataille provides one more definition of literature which highlights its alliance with silence as well as with recoil: 'il se peut même que la littérature ait déjà profondément le même sens que le silence, mais elle recule devant le dernier pas que le silence serait'.[92] Beckett's greatness , as Bataille notes, lies in that he rendered, exposed – and exposed us to – reality in its pure, that is, its poorest, state, the 'state of a wreck', or, as Adorno expresses it (with reference to *Endgame*), Beckett takes 'the theological "unto dust shalt thou return" literally', as 'the Old Testament saying "You shall become dust again" is translated here into "dirt"'.[93] As signalled in the title of Bataille's essay, this reality of dirt and dust, fundamental and minimal, dreadful and repelling as it is, strikes one dumb; it cannot be spoken of or named. In truth, it is and renders one silent: 'ce que nous nommons que par impuissance vagabond, misérable, [...] en vérité est innommable (mais innommable est encore un mot qui nous embrouille)'.[94]

As reality in its pure state is – in truth – unnamable, the Bataillean truth, like death, is not understood in terms of 'what' but in terms of an operation – as the endless process of laying bare, without depending on something transcending this life or this world as an answer or a

[90] Surya, *Georges Bataille,* 488.
[91] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 58.
[92] Georges Bataille, 'Le Silence de Molloy', *OC XII*, 88.
[93] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Notes on Beckett', transl. Dirk Van Hulle and Shane Weller, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 19:2 (2010), 157–78 (171).
[94] Bataille, 'Le Silence de Molloy', 86.

remedy. In terms closer to Hegel, the desire for interrogation is more fundamental than the desire to know, and the desire to be undone is more fundamental than the desire of recognition (which is why Bataille puts forward the erotic struggle against the Hegelian master and slave struggle until death). While there is, arguably, an element of transcendence in Bataille's thought, transcendence for Bataille takes place in this world: it is not to be encountered once we exit this life but while we live. Though unseizable, it is not higher, superior, outside existence, but both within and beyond this life and world. For Surya, therein lies Bataille's distance from Dostoyevsky, as the infinity of remorse and confession that permeate the Dostoyevskian universe ultimately corresponds not to an endless laying bare but to religiosity.[95] Dostoyevsky's remorse and shame remain idealistic and sentimental, inasmuch as they demonize and move away from '« l'hideuse matérialité de ce monde »'.[96] On the contrary, notes Surya, Bataille's profound affinity with Beckett lies in that they do not flee materiality, hideous as it is, but respond to the endless laying bare by endlessly laying bare.[97] In this respect, as the real expropriates truth, the function and the texture of the narrative plot changes. Though in different ways, neither Beckett's nor Bataille's stories are there to thoroughly investigate and divulge the truth; they are there to be interrupted and undermined by the eruption of the real. Narration, far from being a reliable ally in the search of truth, worthy of our trust, proves to be unworthy and risible, riddled with and ridiculed due to the outbursts of the real.[98]

Furthermore, Beckett and Bataille, the latter turning to the materiality of bodies, the former turning to the materiality of objects, join forces to attack the two basic postulates of existentialism, namely meaning and inwardness. Commenting on Beckett's clinging to objects, Critchley, following Adorno, notes how the Beckettian turn to objects – to 'their extraordinary ordinariness', as he puts it – diverges radically from existentialism in a double sense: firstly,

[95] Surya, *Georges Bataille*, 487.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid. 488. Additionally, alongside their different approach to confession, Bataille's and Dostoyevsky's conceptions of evil similarly differ on the grounds of religiosity. Apart from a thematic divergence, since Bataillean evil is not only or necessary wrongdoing but, as it is bound to the Bataillean notion of sovereignty, it refers – both more broadly and in the strictest sense – to a specific temporality of existence (where the priority of future survival gives way to the intensity of the present), a second divergence consists in that, in the case of Dostoevsky, unlimited affection for criminal figures is animated by religiosity, and more precisely, redemption. As Freud remarks in his article 'Dostoevsky and parricide', the case of the *Karamazov Brothers* demonstrates that guilt does not only concern the one who actually commits the crime; the one who longs for the crime before it happens and the one who happily receives it once it happens, are equally guilty. In this sense, Freud adds, 'a criminal is to [Dostoyevsky] almost a redeemer', inasmuch as 'he has taken on himself the guilt which must else have been borne by others'. Sigmund Freud, 'Dostoevsky and Parricide', in *Art and Literature*, transl. James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1990), 443.
[98] ffrench analyses how the narrative structure of the story of the eye is interrupted and undermined by the obscene. See ffrench, *The Cut*, 86–9.

the meaninglessness of existence (in a Godless, absurd, world) is not translated into a meaning, as that would turn it into – and equate it with – idealism (meaninglessness would then become another universal, another idea).[99] Secondly, the world's meaninglessness is no longer seen from the point of view of individuality, and hence as subjectivity's claim to freedom.[100] Adhering to the main critique against existential philosophy, Critchley notes that existentialism has not just left intact the conception of the subject, but that it ends up solidifying and setting free individuality in terms of autonomy and emancipatory freedom. Reacting against the Sartrean 'desire for being', that renders the subject (and its choices) the guarantor of (the) meaning (of meaninglessness), Beckett empties, impoverishes the subject, reducing it to nothingness, whereas Bataille reconfigures subjectivity in terms of a torn subject, torn by a desire to be (to maintain itself) and a desire not to be (to exceed the bounds that secure it but also doom it to confinement). Consequently, while the Beckettian universe is occupied by desolate, dispirited beings, alone amidst various leftovers, worthless among scraps, the aesthetic vision that emanates from Bataille's torn subject involves an attack on form as closed and clearly defined, and an emphasis on slippage, rather than equivalence. Focusing on the movement of differentiation, Bataille resists the conception of meaning in terms of either fixity or transfer, as meaning occurs neither through formation (the positing of form as the ascription of meaning) nor through the use of metaphor (the conception of meaning in terms of transference, exchange, resemblance).

The *informe*, as many critics have argued, is a key notion that crystallizes the Bataillean battle to unform, to undo the closedness of forms, the positing of meaning and the fixity of interpretation. The *informe* is not to be thought of in terms of presence or absence, as it designates neither the absence of form nor the substantiation of nothingness, but rather highlights rhythm and movement, slippage and metamorphosis. Thus it has been defined as 'metamorphic rhythm', by Rosalind Krauss, the 'rhythmic condition of form', by GeorgesDidi-Hubermann and 'the movement of slippage, difference, differentiation', by Patrick ffrench.[101] The operational character of the *informe*, as it undoes the logic of oppositions, has been highlighted by critics. As ffrench writes, with reference to materiality and idealism: 'not materialism/idealism but the operation of materiality upon the ideal'.[102] Additionally, as the *informe* is an *operation upon* – rather an *opposition to* – form, the internal enabling – rather

[99] Critchley, *Very Little … Almost Nothing*, 173–5.
[100] Ibid.
[101] As quoted and gathered by ffrench in *The Cut*, 20.
[102] Ibid. 11.

than the absence – of form, it puts forward, in ffrench's words, 'the movement of becoming present as always conditioned by an operation of re-presentation and difference'.[103] In its capacity as the generator of form, the *informe*, apart from the oppositional logic of presence/absence, material/ideal, also defies the logic of cause and effect: form emerges as the residue of the *informe* and the *informe*, in its turn (which is precisely what is lost when form comes into view) comes to be the (invisible) residue of form.

In his own definition of the *informe*, Bataille, faithful to the practical disposition that characterizes the whole *Documents* venture, announces that our focus should be directed towards what words do (rather than on what they mean), on their task (rather than on their meaning). In this regard, the *informe* is (its task is): 'un terme servant à déclasser'. And Bataille continues by giving a more detailed account:

> Il faudrait en effet, pour que les hommes académiques soient contents, que l'univers prenne forme. La philosophie entière n'a pas d'autre but : il s'agit de donner une redingote à ce qui est [...]. Par contre, affirmer que l'univers ne ressemble à rien et n'est qu'*informe* revient à dire que l'univers est quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat.[104]

Commenting on the passage, ffrench guards the operational character of the *informe* against its substantiation – not even as an *araignée* or a *crachat*, as Bataille willingly seems to suggest. Following Krauss, and in contrast to Kristeva, ffrench insists that the *informe* should be considered in terms of an operation rather than in terms of a referent, a thing, an attribute, an object, and thereby strongly opposes the reification of the process through the fetishization of certain states as abject (such as the material or the maternal).

In 'L'Anus solaire', the theory of the universe as *informe* is paired with a view of the world (a worldview) as parodic, that is, in flux. As the world is parodic, fluid, the relation of the objects that constitute it lies in the constant movement of circulation. The logic of circulation, unlike the circular logic that relies on the completion of the circle, is one of endless flow, as Bataille declares : 'Il est clair que le monde est purement parodique, c'est à dire que quelque chose qu'on regarde est la parodie d'une autre, ou encore la même chose sous une forme décevante', and as he adds, asserting the lack of any principle and providing a list of things as parodies of other things: 'Tout le monde a conscience que la vie est parodique et qu'il manque une

[103] Ibid. 20.
[104] Bataille, 'Informe', *OC I,* 217.

interprétation. Ainsi le plomb est la parodie de l'or. L'air est la parodie de l'eau. Le cerveau est la parodie de l'équateur. Le coït est la parodie du crime.'[105]

To say that the world is parodic is to endorse the Heraclitean flux doctrine, in its comparison of existing things with a river's flow, against the Platonic theory of forms and ideas. Additionally, to say that the world is parodic is to subsume language with the worldly movement of circulation and to make it proceed via copulation. In the omnipresence of a constant state of flux, the copula 'is' becomes, as ffrench observes, 'the mark not of an equivalence but of slippage'.[106] Copulative joining, in both its grammatical and corporeal sense, is a movement out of and back into limits.[107] The copula (the connecting verb) acts as the link, the tie that connects and allows the possibility of relation (the circulation of words, the formulation of sentences); copulation (the coming together of bodies, sexual intercourse) connects and links through leakage, setting up contact in terms of the leakage of the self, rather than in terms of a connection with the other. In this respect, in *L'Erotisme*, Bataille makes a remark that is close to Susan Sontag's observation that 'making love resembles having an epileptic fit'.[108] Underscoring how the erotic act brings no real union but consists, rather, in a shared state of crisis, he writes: 'au moment de la conjonction […] il n'y a pas à proprement parler d'union, deux individus sous l'empire de la violence [...] partagent un état de crise où l'un comme l'autre est hors de soi. Les deux êtres sont en même temps ouverts à la continuité'.[109] The conception of the erotic act in terms both of solitude and of overwhelming diffusion echoes the Bataillean conception of dramatization, which is similarly described both as solitary and as profoundly communicative. As Bataille has already asserted in *L'Expérience intérieure*:

> Si nous ne savions dramatiser, nous ne pourrions sortir de nous-même. Nous vivrions isolés et tassés. Mais une sorte de rupture – dans l'angoisse – nous laisse à la limite des larmes : alors nous nous perdons, nous oublions nous-mêmes et communiquons avec un au-delà insaisissable.[110]

Dramatization has a double meaning: the term 'dramatic' designates both a play and a turbulent event. 'To dramatize' means both to present a performance and to present in a dramatic way,

[105] Bataille, 'L'Anus solaire', *OC I*, 81.
[106] ffrench, *The Cut*, 21, 27.
[107] In this respect, ffrench, in highly structural terms, notes that sexual relation involves two axes: the vertical axis (erection) towards the sun and the horizontal axis (copulation) between objects. ffrench, *The Cut*, 56.
[108] Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination', in *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Penguin, 1966), 35–73 (57).
[109] Bataille, *L'Erotisme,* 103–4.
[110] Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure*, *OC V*, 23.

to exaggerate, to overdramatize; it means both to act, and to overact. Bataille uses the term in both ways: dramatization is meant as insistence and intensification, since continuous effort and repetition is required in order to have a glimpse of instantaneous rupture.[111] Yet, on the occasion of *Madame Edwarda*, the second meaning of dramatization is put forward, that of acting, staging, performing, as God is brought on stage appearing (masked or laid bare?) as a public whore. Edwarda shows how the experience of ecstasy – be it mystic or sexual –, though comparable, is preferable to the act of dying, since in death '[l'être] en même temps qu'il nous est donné, il nous est retiré'.[112] Therefore, death is – and must – be sought 'dans le *sentiment* de la mort', in moments when we seemingly die, it *seems* to us *as if* we are dying ('il nous semble que nous mourons').[113] All that we can get (and we can aspire to) is merely an impression, a sensation, or, one could add more emphatically, a pretence, an *as if.* In this respect, the Bataillean act is also an acting, an undertaking but also a performance, a venture but also a pretence. Yet, this pretence is not to be dismissed as false nor presented as truth. This glimpse of death is fictive but the fictive here is not juxtaposed with the real or with truth but rather points to the inescapability of the fictitious in one's relation to death.[114]

Alongside the *informe* whose importance has rightly been highlighted by criticism inasmuch as it registers the movement of openness and continuity of the Bataillean venture, I want to bring in the mask as another model that accounts for the tension and doubleness of Bataille's narratives, as well as for their apparent theatrical character. The mask, neither self-present nor simply absent, shows boldly how Bataille undermines representation in its traditional sense without completely abandoning it. Like the *informe*, the mask does not simply oppose form; yet, while the *informe* emphasizes movement, as it both generates and undoes form, the mask designates more emphatically the ruination of form as well as the centrality of re-presentation in Bataille's writing. Additionally, alongside Nancy's logic of exscription, which I developed in part I, the mask – defying both presence and absence – offers another way of approaching the residual logic of Bataille's writing and its embedding in the real. Nancy, in his description of how exscription works, notes: 'le cri de Bataille n'est pas masqué ni étouffé : il se fait

[111] In *L'Expérience intérieure* the experience of rupture occurs, as we are told, by the successive and insistent projection (both through evocation and imagination) of images of rupture.
[112] Bataille, 'Préface', *Madame Edwarda,* 11.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Leslie Hill underlines the element of the 'fictitious' in his analysis of Bataille's text 'Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice', *OC XII*, pointing out how spectatorship ends up offering a paradox of proximity and distance, tragedy and comedy, See Leslie Hill, *Bataille, Klosswoski, Blanchot. Writing at the Limit* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67–9.

entendre *comme le cri qu'on n'entend pas'*.[115] In this respect, the cry, in its intensity, is not represented, inscribed, tamed, stifled, muted in the text; yet neither is it outside, beyond the text, unrepresentable: the cry is in the text, presented in it (heard), yet presented as exscribed, not fully contained (not heard). Yet, the mask can also be thought of not in terms of another trope that masks and covers, but in terms of the Derridean conception of 'mimesis without imitation'. In this sense, the mask ruins imitation and destabilizes resemblance without getting rid of them altogether. There is masking (mimesis), not because there is something to see (to imitate), but because there is nothing to see (and nothing to mask). To bring into play the term that Bataille uses in his definition of the *informe*, alluding to philosophy's attempt to dress up the world, instead of a *redingote*, Bataille offers a mask. In what follows, with reference to Bataille's text on Lascaux, I will show in what way masking proves more fitting than clothing.

The logic of masking/showing

Tension, one can unreservedly argue, is the distinctive mark and the driving force of Bataille's thought and life. Yet, as tension is not simply asserted as something to then be overcome, but rather becomes a matter of attainment and maintenance, Bataille's thought is characterized by a series of tensional couplings, where each term neither opposes nor excludes but agitates the other - both inflaming and disturbing it. As Bataille strives to break free from the actual and the possible only to bind himself to the impossible, these couplings include, most notably, life and death – or, in other words, experience and communication. More importantly, these couplings both ask for and emanate from a daring gaze at the world (and life) as it is, as well as a fondness for artistic practice.[116] The Bataillean desire to embrace the real – both in its totality and in its bareness – is accompanied by a profound affection for art. Commenting on the central place that art occupies in Bataille's work, Surya notes that 'l'art [...] induit Bataille [...] à penser la même chose [ce qu'il a sans cesse pensé] au moyen de nouveaux éléments'.[117] Additionally and conversely, Bataille's texts on art, apart from intensifying and developing some of the key themes of his thought, provide us with, as ffrench observes, a useful model of how his own literary texts work.[118]

[115] Jean-Luc Nancy, 'L'exscrit', *Une pensée finie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990), 62.
[116] As Jean Bruno comments, 'ses écrits ultérieurs manifestent une avidité de connaître la totalité du réel et une rare finesse dans l'appréciation des formes les plus diverses de l'art'. Jean Bruno, 'Techniques d'Illumination chez Georges Bataille', in *Critique* 195–196, 1963 (août-septembre), 706–21 (718).
[117] Surya, *Georges Bataille*, 537.
[118] ffrench, *The Cut*, 111.

Bataille's affection for art, on the same plane as his devotion to life, can be traced back to his famous letter to Kojève. The question of 'négativité sans emploi' that is raised in the letter is linked not only to his existence (to the open wound that is his life – eluding thereby the closedness of the Hegelian system), but also to artworks:

> Je la [la négativité sans emploi] suis dans les formes qu'elle engendre non tout d'abord en moi-même, mais en d'autres. Le plus souvent, la négativité impuissante se fait œuvre d'art : cette métamorphose dont les conséquences sont réelles d'habitude répond mal à la situation laissée par l'achèvement de l'histoire (ou par la pensée de son achèvement) [;] quand éluder n'est plus possible (quand arrive l'heure de la vérité).[119]

To respond to the question of how art gets through at the moment of truth, Bataille, as I will show, does not take the standpoint of the end of history but turns to another decisive moment. 'En prenant [le] chemin à rebours', as Kristeva aptly phrases the Bataillean convergence and divergence from Hegel, Bataille directs his attention to the birth of humanity which is bound to the parietal art of Lascaux.[120] As we read in his text *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*: 'le nom de Lascaux est le symbole des âges qui connurent le passage de la bête humaine à l'être délié que nous sommes'. [121]

For Bataille, contrary to Hegel, the birth of humanity coincides with – and is carried through – the birth of art, inasmuch as the passage from animality to humanity is not effectuated through, and due to, work, but rather due to figuration. Additionally, while the logic of work is that of negation, figuration puts forward a logic of return. Indeed, the abundance of animal figures in the Lascaux cave bears the mark of a return – not a return *to* but a return *of* animality, at the very moment at which humanity is attained, and by the very gesture by which humanity is enacted. And yet, as I wish to show, the importance of Lascaux for Bataille, and, consequently, Bataille's text on Lascaux for us, is that what returns (as the repressed) is not only animality, but also, and perhaps more crucially, fiction, pretence and masking.[122]

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[119] Bataille, 'Lettre à X', *OC V*, 370.
[120] Julia Kristeva, 'Bataille, l'expérience, et la pratique' *in Bataille,* dir. Philippe Sollers (Paris: 10/18, Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973), 267–301 (269). Kristeva underlines that Bataille and Hegel share the same preoccupations, most notably the desire to embrace the totality of the real, but their methods radically differ.
[121] Georges Bataille, *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, *OC XI*, 22.
[122] On the importance of reading Lascaux as a problematization of cultural origins (against proposing Lascaux as the alternative or the authentic origin of both art and humanity) in the historic and cultural context of post-war France, see Douglas Smith, **'**Beyond the Cave: Lascaux and the Prehistoric in Post-War French Culture', *French Studies*, Volume 58, Issue 2, April 2004, 219–32.

In the paintings that decorate the Lascaux cave, human faces are masked with animal heads and, more broadly, human figures are absent, ruled out by innumerable animal figures. In the section 'La représentation de l'homme', under the title 'L'homme paré du prestige de la bête', commenting on what he glosses as the 'miracle of Lascaux', and demonstrating in what sense Lascaux introduces a paradox to the heart of figuration, Bataille writes: 'ce qui nous fige en un long étonnement est l'effacement de l'homme devant l'animal – et de l'homme justement devenant humain – est le plus grand que nous puissions imaginer'.[123] Commenting on the abundance of animal figures and the absence of human figures, we read:

> Dans la mesure où il [l'homme de l'Age du renne] s'est lui-même représenté, le plus souvent, il dissimulait ses traits sous le masque de l'animal. [...] S'il avouait la forme humaine, il la cachait dans le même instant ; il se donnait à ce moment la tête de l'animal. Comme s'il avait honte de son visage et que, voulant se désigner, il a dû en même temps se donner le masque d'un autre.[124]

In the above passages, while Bataille employs both effacement and masking with regard to representation, I will, somewhat in contrast to Bataille, pose the logic of masking as more central, inasmuch as I consider the mask as a key term that accounts for both effacement and masking.

Bataille's text on Lascaux, in its emphasis on the representation of animals (which either disguises or erases the representation of humans), does not aim to foreground animality as the (re)discovered origin of humanity; it rather aspires to show how the animal figures of the Lascaux cave bring about a tensional logic that opposes representation while not getting rid of it altogether. More broadly, one can argue, on one hand, that Bataille's writings cannot be labelled as non-representative, since everything in Bataille is represented and representative. Bataille's fictions are made up of all his favoured themes: eyes and blindness, bodies and sexuality, death and dying, priests and whores, breaking and escaping the law, Paris and Spain; even God is represented in the character of Edwarda. Yet, on the other hand, Bataille's writings do not represent anything in the sense that they offer nothing to see, understand or untangle. Edwarda does not *stand for* but bluntly introduces herself as God. Additionally, rather than offering access to the divine, she blocks vision; while willing to offer herself, her most intimate

[123] Bataille, *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, 63.
[124] Ibid.

parts, her divine tatters, all that she offers is the thickness of her nudity. Edwarda, as the narrator informs us, is still, thick, impenetrable like a rock; there is nothing behind (her).

At this point, I should stress that Bataille's commentary on the miracle of Lascaux is, above all, Bataille's personal vision of the miracle. The history of the Lascaux cave is construed as Bataille's personal narrative not only in the sense that Bataille lingers over unintelligible traces, gathers dispersed figures and turns them into a coherent story – somehow imposing order on the disorderly figures, endowing them with an abundance of meaning, and thereby rendering Lascaux the birthplace of art and humanity – but also in the sense that Bataille populates the earthly site of Lascaux with all the pairs that inhabit his own universe, namely the sacred and the profane, human life and animality, conscious and instinctual life, history and nature. The Bataillean text on Lascaux is not a veracious account of prehistoric art or humanity, but accounts for Bataille's conceptions of the human, art, representation, and sets up what is the focal point in our inquiry of the literary real, namely the intimate connection between art and humanity. As Bataille notes, 'cette manière de voir me conduisait à montrer à quel point l'œuvre de l'art était intimement liée à la formation de l'humanité'.[125]

In the Bataillean quest for the origin, and as Lascaux is construed as a tale of origin (of both humanity and art), origin is not understood in terms of a starting point, a place where something begins, but is recast in terms of a passage and a becoming. Additionally, this passage is not evolutionary but hybrid; therefore, it is to be understood as a movement *within*, rather than as a progression *from-to* (from animality to humanity).[126] Furthermore, the passage is not meant in spiritual terms and therefore effectuates a celebration of animal and not of spiritual life. In this respect, Lascaux invites a reconfiguration of the relation between the human and the animal – which does not consist in the destruction, transformation and transcendence of animality in favour – and in the name – of humanity but shows how humans are inescapably fascinated by and divided between humanity and animality. Bataille's reconception of humanity, via Lascaux, as not clearly distinguished from, or distinctly opposed to, animality, approaches Agamben's suggestion that humans should be rethought of as both the site and the result of divisions and caesurae and, by the same token, the relationship between humanity and animality should be recast in terms of an irreducible betweenness, incongruity and separation,

[125] Bataille, 'Préface', *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, 9.
[126] For two detailed accounts of the significance on Lascaux in our re-configuration of the human, see Jean-Michel Rey, 'Le Signe aveugle', in *L'Arc* 44 (1967), 54–63 and René de Sollier, 'L'Homme de Lascaux', *L'Arc* 32 (1971), 58 – 62.

rather than settlement, articulation and conjunction.[127] This relation can be also described in the Deleuzian terms of 'pure becoming', 'pure difference', 'pure variation' (in brief 'pure movement' – as opposed to the reality of things in terms of the actual and the identifiable). However, the tension that interests me most here is not that of the tensional relationship between animality and humanity, but how figuration comes to play a crucial role in this relationship.

The gesture of figuration firstly attests that the passage is not accomplished once and once only. As the innumerable superimposed animal figures show, the passage relies on the repetition of gesture. Additionally, the blurred and indistinct animal figures, which cover – and are drawn on – fragments, marks and lines, shades and shadows of other previous figures, show that it is the gesture, momentary appearance and the moment of appearance that truly counts, rather than the image, the enduring object, the result.[128] One can understand why the figures – in their superimposition – coming into view as a celebration of confusion and the momentary, defying any logic of coherent whole and endurance, grasp Bataille's attention. Labelling the cave 'une scène théâtrale', Bataille renders it a moveable feast: 'une constellation de la vie animale, divergente, y est mouvante autour de nous'.[129]

The theatrical scene and the troupe of animal life – shifting and unstable, as it comes forth – evoke the Deleuzian theatre of repetition, with its emphasis on movement and directness and its consideration of masking as constitutive. Deleuze sketches an order of movement, change, difference and directness, which, operating through sensation and affect, runs counter to the order of representation, conceptualization and mediation. For Deleuze, emotions, bodies, contexts can neither 'be' nor be 'represented', belonging neither to the order of 'being' nor to that of 'representation'. Thus, he erects a universe of prior dynamic communication – composed of language, gestures, masks and phantoms – that come before words, bodies, faces, characters:

> Dans le théâtre de la répétition, on éprouve des forces pures, des tracés dynamiques qui agissent sur l'esprit sans intermédiaire, et qui l'unissent directement à la nature et à l'histoire, un langage qui parle avant les mots, des gestes qui s'élaborent avant les

[127] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open. Man and Animal*, transl. Kevin Attell (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2004), 16.
[128] The execution of the paintings is part of a hunting ritual, as hunting, despite its productive nature, is primarily a game rather than simply a job. The figures become part of a rite of evocation, where what is vital is the moment of appearance and not the thing, the durable object.
[129] Bataille, *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, 51.

> corps organisés, des masques avant des visages, des spectres et des fantômes avant les personnages – tout l'appareil de la répétition comme « puissance terrible ».[130]

The Deleuzian theatre of repetition defies the logic of manifestation (the theatre of representation) in that it puts forward masking as constitutive. In this regard, contrary to manifestation, repetition does not enact a movement of (un)concealment and unveiling, but one of disguise and constitution. Correspondingly, in the paintings of Lascaux, the birth of the human – the passage from animality to humanity – brings forth the rebirth of the animal in figuration. While humans deny their animal nature and gain their humanity by painting, their rejected animality returns as the favoured leitmotif of their paintings. As Bataille writes:

> Ce qu'avec une force juvénile annoncent ces figures inhumaines n'est pas seulement que ceux qui les ont peintes ont achevé de devenir des hommes en les peignant, mais qu'ils l'ont fait en donnant de l'animalité, non d'eux-mêmes, cette image suggérant ce que l'humanité a de fascinant.[131]

The act of figuration involves disguise (inasmuch as an abundance of animal figures masks the newly constituted humanity) as well as detour (inasmuch as humans turn away from the presently gained humanity). Figuration shows and – concurrently – hides the formation of the human; in parallel, it involves the denial and – simultaneously – the return of animality (as the repeated figure of painting). In this respect, the denial of animality, contrary to Hegel, does not obey a logic of dialectical suppression, but a spectral logic, as negation is not seen in terms of conservation (or more precisely in terms of transformation, conservation and finally transcendence), but in terms of return.

Additionally, as Bataille glosses figuration in terms of a 'sacred moment', there are three remarks to be made. Firstly, as the temporality of figuration is that of the moment, Bataille includes figuration among his various privileged moments –instantaneous ruptures, disruptive instants– such as laughter, erotic or religious ecstasy. Figuration is conceived as momentary (rather than as lasting), since, as already mentioned, it is thought of in terms of appearance (rather than in terms of an object). Secondly, as figuration is not evidently, that is, lastingly, useful, it underlines how the difference between the sacred and the profane is above all a temporal difference. The multiplicity of figures, rendered redundant after their appearance, points to the difference between the structured time of work and a time that does not conform

[130] Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: PUF, 1968, 2019), 19.
[131] Bataille, *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art,* 62.

to the logic of utility and duration. Thirdly, as figuration is linked to the sacred, it goes against both the logic of immediacy (usually associated with the sacred) and the logic of mediation (usually associated with figuration). The moment of figuration suggests another way of relation (and of representation) that corresponds to the moment of transgression. Against Hegelian self-consciousness and negative (creative) action, Bataille privileges transgression as the crucial anthropogenic moment, where the negated returns as desirable and is rendered as such in figuration. Or, as Susan Guerlac notes in more Freudian terms, Bataille posits the unconscious negativity of interdiction and transgression against the Hegelian negativity of consciousness and action.[132]

Against the dialectical logic that advances and proceeds through a binary structure of opposition and synthesis, Bataille insists on the double operation of negation and return, and adds – to the creation of man, and the world of work, culture and history through the negation of the given, the natural world – a second negation – the negation of the world of work – which gives rise to the sacred and which 'truly' constitutes humanity. Reviewing Bataille's monograph on Lascaux, Blanchot insists on the importance of this twofold negation, inasmuch as it disperses the birth of the human and the origin of humanity, rendering it unlocatable, recasting the origin as what is originally deferred ('originellement différée'). [133]

Drawing on Blanchot's remark, I want to highlight that the crucial element of this second negation is that it does not consist of a further step, but that a double logic – of negation and return – is entangled in the binary logic of opposition. To put it briefly, to the progressive logic of the beginning and the end of history, Bataille opposes a tensional logic according to which the entry into history is concurrently a leap out of history, since the time of the sacred (the time of figuration) is both within and outside (pre)history. We read in *L'Erotisme* about the paradoxical temporality of the two realms that constitute the human world:

> La societé humaine n'est pas seulement le monde du travail. Simultanément – ou successivement – le monde profane et le monde sacré la composent, qui en sont les deux formes complémentaires. Le monde profane est celui des interdits. Le monde sacré s'ouvre à des transgressions limitées.[134]

[132] Suzanne Guerlac, '"Recognition" by a Woman!: A Reading of Bataille's *L'Erotisme*', *Yale French Studies. On Bataille,* 78, 1990, 90–105 (95).
[133] Blanchot, 'Naissance de l'art', in *L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 19.
[134] Bataille, *L'Erotisme*, 70 (my emphasis).

Dissecting the paradoxical temporal relation between the sacred and the profane, ffrench shows how, on the one hand, the sacred is radically opposed to the profane, while on the other hand, as there is a passage from the profane to the sacred, the two realms are linked through sacrifice (which is to be meant here etymologically as the act of making sacred rather than as an act of slaughtering).[135] The relationship between the sacred and the profane needs to be successive because if the sacred comes too early, the two realms will not be able to communicate and two closed totalities will be formed. As ffrench warns, 'immediacy prior to mediation, animalistic immediacy, is a totality which does not allow for any mediation, any relation'.[136] Yet, if the sacred in its immediacy comes afterwards, it will have no power to disrupt the process and the possibility of relation will be again closed off. It must therefore come both simultaneously and successively.

In this respect, in *L'Erotisme* we read about two dispositions that make up humans:

> Les hommes sont en un même temps soumis à deux mouvements : de terreur, qui rejette, et d'attrait qui commande le respect fasciné. L'interdit et la transgression répondent à ces deux mouvements contradictoires : l'interdit rejette, mais la fascination introduit la transgression. L'interdit, le tabou ne s'opposent au divin qu'en un sens, mais le divin est l'aspect fascinant de l'interdit : c'est l'interdit transfiguré.[137]

Commenting on the passage, Suzanne Guerlac argues that there is a double relationship between interdiction and transgression, or rather that the relationship between interdiction and transgression follows two different logics: a logic of opposition, to some extent, as well as a logic of recoil and return.[138] In the first case, interdiction is opposed to transgression and, accordingly, the profane to the sacred, while in the second case, interdiction and transgression are both considered as moments belonging to the sacred. Additionally, as Guerlac notes, in the first case there is willful action (agency), while in the second case there is yielding (affectivity).[139] In this way, in the first case, interdiction of the violence of nature is actively imposed and results in the division between the sacred and the profane: interdiction renders violence sacred and enables the emergence of the realm of reason; transgression is, subsequently, the regulated introduction of violence (of the sacred) into the profane, which

[135] Patrick ffrench, *After Bataille*, *Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007), 64.
[136] Ibid. ffrench makes the above remarks mainly with reference to the constitution of the subject and the possibility of experience, that is exposure.
[137] Bataille, *L'Erotisme*, 71.
[138] Guerlac, '"Recognition" by a Woman!', 97–8.
[139] Ibid. 95–6.

reinvigorates the system and keeps it going. On the contrary, in the second case, there is no active but a responsive attitude to the violence of nature. We are not acting upon nature, we are rather acted upon. In this case, interdiction is bound to horror, while transgression is bound to fascination. Here, the sacred is not opposed and hence complementary to the profane; it is constituted by two contradictory moments – fear and rejection (resulting in interdiction), attraction and fascination (resulting in transgression) – and it jeopardizes the system, putting it at risk.

To phrase the above in more explicitly Hegelian terms, at issue is the question of the moment and whether it is subordinated to a process, a result, a gain, a project, or if it constitutes a cut, a pure loss, an interruption from within. Derrida, in his essay dedicated to Bataille, considers him to be a Hegelian without reserve, who turns mastery into sovereignty, sacrifice for something into sacrifice for nothing, resolution and absolute knowledge into interruption and laughter.[140] As Derrida emphasizes, while both Hegel and Bataille share a crucial moment – the exposure to absolute negativity – Hegel construes it in retrospect, whereas Bataille, looking back at it, guards it like a night watchman.[141] While Hegel retrospectively gives a response, Bataille returns to this prior moment and gives no response. Thus, the Hegelian and Bataillean undertakings, in their divergence, demonstrate how turning one's back is not the same as turning away, and how fleeing and turning one's back and fleeing is not the same as stepping back, retreating in fright and returning.[142]

To better understand Bataille's response to nature, and more specifically, the issue of recoil before nature, I want to bring in, alongside Hegelian negativity, the Kantian sublime. The sublime, in opposition to the beautiful, which involves a judgement of taste and an experience of harmony and serenity, is an experience of the power and the intimidating greatness of nature. Additionally, this experience throws subjectivity and appearance into confusion, as the sublime marks a failure of representation in a double sense. As Thomas Huhn points out in his commentary of the sublime, subjectivity fails not only to present the sublime *to* itself but, due to the power of the sublime, it also fails to present (sense) *itself.*[143] And yet, as subjectivity for

[140] Derrida, Jacques, 'De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale. Un hégélianisme sans réserve', *L'Arc* 32 (1967), 24–45.
[141] Ibid.
[142] ffrench notes that natural life, for Hegel, is sacrificed in favour of something else (essential spiritual life, reason, meaning and truth, human reality and the birth of the subject), while Bataille assents to life as it is, that is, as exposure. ffrench, *After Bataille*, 78–9.
[143] Additionally, here one should bear in mind that in the aesthetic judgement what is under consideration is not nature itself, as such, but a presentation of nature, as Huhn writes, 'when I am judging nature to be sublime, I am judging not nature but the manner in which I have presented nature to myself. I am judging a representation of

Kant is constituted (elevated above nature) through and due to its subjection to awe (the awe of nature), the power of the subject is never really suspended in the case of the Kantian sublime.

Indeed, the subject's encounter with the sublime is marked by a double peculiarity: the sublime constitutes, solidifies and elevates the subject since, in the first place, it is the subject who attributes to nature an overwhelming power, presenting nature as fearful and, secondly, since the sublime has the paradoxical status of being, what Kant terms, 'a power without dominance'. Regarding the paradoxical status of the sublime, Kant insists that the dynamically sublime (as opposed to the mathematical sublime) consists of our contemplation of nature as a power that 'has no dominance over us'. The full sentence reads as follows: 'when in an aesthetic judgement we consider nature as a power that has no dominance over us, then it is dynamically sublime'.[144] In other words, we consider nature fearful without in fact being afraid of it. Underlining the two-faced disposition of fear with reference to the sublime, Kant notes: 'we can however consider an object fearful, without being afraid of it'.[145] The power of nature therefore forces us to experience, alongside our physical powerlessness, our independence and superiority – or, in more Kantian terms, the power of nature sets up our capacity to judge ourselves independent and superior (over the power of nature). Therefore, the experience (the judgement) of the sublime finally reveals ourselves and gives rise to a feeling of superiority due to our power to reason. Huhn, designating the judgement of the sublime as 'a record of our having overreached ourselves', stresses that it is primarily a founding moment of subjectivity: 'when we realize that we have been overwhelmed', he writes, 'what we also thereby realize is ourselves'; 'we realize and found the self in that moment when we judge that which is beyond the self'.[146] In this regard, the sublime also involves pleasure, apart from (or more precisely after) fear and pain, since, as Huhn observes, in our *consideration* of nature as fearful, we distance ourselves both (externally) from nature and (internally) from our fear of nature (and the pain it causes us).[147]

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nature'. Thomas Huhn, 'The Kantian Sublime and The Nostalgia for Violence', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53:3, Summer 1995, 269–75 (270).

[144] Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, transl. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), §28, 119.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Huhn, 'The Kantian Sublime and the Nostalgia for Violence', 272.

[147] These considerations make evident how aesthetic pleasure lies not in the content of judgement but in the judgement itself, in the act of judging as such. Huhn makes the helpful distinction between external and internal distancing, showing how our external distancing from nature (while fear is immersive, the very *consideration* of nature as fearful requires a distance between ourselves and the object of our fear) is further internalized (after fearing and being overwhelmed by nature, we overcome our fear; hence, we consider nature as fearful but we are not afraid of it). See, Huhn, 271–2.

The Kantian sublime is essentially and ultimately bound to the demand of positing subjectivity and the moral law – briefly, freedom – against nature; it is not simply part of, but goes to the centre of, the constitution of the self. As Huhn points out, the powerlessness of the subject is caught up within the economy of the self, inasmuch as it supports (both justifying and grounding) an exchange, the exchange of a powerful self.[148] In similar terms, Roger Scruton, framing our disposition towards the sublime within the logic of the self, argues that in the very awe of nature, we sense 'our own ability as free beings to measure up against it'.[149]

Yet, we need to insist on the temporality of our judgement, as it leads to the first peculiarity of the sublime, as mentioned above. When faced with nature, firstly, we are overwhelmed, afraid of nature; then, we realize that we have been overwhelmed and we distance ourselves from our fear. Yet, the tour de force of Kant's argumentation lies in the fact that there is still another moment which precedes our overwhelming, a moment which initiates the process and leads the way. Taking into account this prior moment, the temporality becomes the following: first of all, it is we who present nature as fearful; subsequently, we are, at first, afraid of it and, then, we *consider* it as fearful, overcoming thereby – and distancing ourselves from – our previous horror-struck reaction. As Huhn writes with reference to this prior moment: 'the paradox of the sublime is that *we* accord nature an overwhelming power'; 'nature is empowered when we *present* it as an object of fear'.[150] Yet, in this set up, subjectivity is not fully installed, which is why, instead of occurring once only, the process is repeated, as Huhn writes with particular emphasis on the artfulness and the trickery that is involved:

> The sublime is the realization of our dominance, our power over the supposed power of nature. But in order to feel this power of ours, in order to realize our dominance, we must insist upon nature being a fearful power – and in repeatedly staging its redoubtable character we repeatedly stage our dominance. (One suspects we would tire of so much rehearsal).[151]

Against this context, and while Bataille's thought adheres to both the Kantian overwhelming and the Hegelian exposure, in the Bataillean experience there is no passing through, as in Hegel, nor a rendering of it as a moment of being, as in Kant. Thus, the Bataillean analysis of the animal figures of Lascaux sidesteps the two major risks of representation, namely, the Hegelian

[148] Huhn, 'The Kantian Sublime and the Nostalgia for Violence', 273.
[149] Scruton, *Beauty. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 63.
[150] Huhn, 'The Kantian Sublime and the Nostalgia for Violence', 271 (emphasis in the original).
[151] Ibid. 272.

aspiration of complete representation and the Kantian positing of a controllable – for the mind – beyond.[152] Through the key term of the mask, Bataille, in contrast to Hegel, neither renders identical the symbol and the symbolized nor, in contrast to Kant, contents himself with designating the impossibility that surrounds possibility (of representation, subjectivity); he insists instead on the impossible representation of this beyond, reconfiguring it in terms of masking. As masking consists of showing and hiding – in the same gesture – it operates both within and outside the representational system. The animal masks of Lascaux, as a coalescence of non-coincidence, can be thought of as a suspense of suspension – inasmuch as they display (hang) the interruption (of animality) and interrupt (put on hold) the display (of humanity).

The mask, corresponding to a liminal state where one is oneself and (an)other, differs from the veil that hides. In contrast to the veil and the dialectic of concealment and unveiling it enacts, wearers of masks are neither fully themselves (their self that is masked) nor fully their mask, but suspended between the two – reminding us that 'person' is etymologically derived from *persona* which originally means theatrical mask (as personae are masks worn by actors on stage).

Re-con-figuring

The animal figures left by the first humans give rise to the Bataillean redrawing of the Adamic myth, as humans clothe themselves with animal grace:

> les traces, qu'après des millénaires nombreux ces hommes nous ont laissé de leur humanité, se bornent à de représentations d'animaux. [...] Ces hommes de Lascaux rendirent sensible le fait qu'en étant des hommes, ils nous ressemblaient, mais ils l'ont fait en nous laissant l'image de l'animalité qu'ils quittaient. Comme s'ils avaient dû parer un prestige naissant de la grâce animale qu'ils avaient perdue. […].[153]

In his commentary on the Adamic myth, Agamben points not only to the paradoxical conception of human nature that lies at the heart of it, but also to the crucial role played by nudity and clothing in its foundation and sustenance.[154] According to the Myth, Adam, created in grace, relishes an originally graceful nature and is naked unashamed. After the Fall, after disobeying God's command (through sin), grace is lost, corrupted nature appears and nudity

[152] As quoted by Andrew Bowie, *German Philosophy. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 54.
[153] Bataille, *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, 62.
[154] Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, transl. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2011), 70–1.

needs to be concealed. Yet, as Agamben observes, in the beginning there is no nudity, since nudity is already cloaked (clothed) with grace. Thus, in Agamben's decomposition and recomposition of the myth, before, there is no prior nudity but the clothing of grace; correspondingly, afterwards, there is no nudity – that needs to be covered – but denudation – from the clothing of grace.

In a reversal that registers the Bataillean primacy of transgression in the theological lexicon of sin, Agamben puts forward sin as original, and nature as derivative: 'with the removal of grace an original nature comes to light that is no longer original, because only sin is original, and so this nature has become merely a derivation of this sin'.[155] Put differently, the supposedly 'pure' human nature, which is actually considered impure and corrupted, since it is not created in grace, does not exist as such. Agamben underlines how there is no nature in the absence of sinning and no nudity outside or before denudation. In his words: 'nature is now defined by the non-nature (grace) that it has lost, just as nudity is defined by the non-nudity (clothing) that has been stripped from it'.[156]

Put differently, what *supposedly* comes before *actually* comes after. Yet, this does not simply mean that what is considered as preceding is subsequently construed as preceding but that it emerges – for the first time – as preceding consequently. What is presupposed as prior, emerges as such afterwards. Thus, there is no truth, no secret behind, as the secret and the truth are to be found not behind the act of tearing apart but *in* the very act of tearing apart. As Agamben remarks, in truth, there is only the act of laying bare, the act of denuding. There is no prior nudity, no pre-existing nudity (apart from the act of denuding): 'in truth there is only baring, only the infinite gesticulations that remove clothing and grace from the body'.[157]

Considering fashion as the 'profane heir of the theology of clothing', Agamben comments on how Helmut Newton's diptych 'Sie Kommen' (they are coming) both inscribes and reverses the theology of clothing.[158] The diptych, originally published as a two-page spread in French *Vogue* in 1981, shows four super-women (top-models) on the march. On the left page they appear naked with the exception of high heels, while on the right page they wear high fashion suits. Moving away from John Berger's opposition between being naked (wearing no costume in order to be looked at, by a male gaze) and being nude (wearing no costume and being

[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid. 78–9.
[158] Ibid. 80.

yourself), between nakedness (as a representation of nudity) and nudity (as a process of relief and banality, where mystery is dissolved), Newton directs his attention to the opposition between nudity and clothing showing how the two images, despite their apparent difference, amount to the same. Conforming to the conventions of the fashion industry, the women in both photos have the same stiff postures, glacial looks and indifferent facial expressions. While a more Berger-inspired commentary would linger on the objectification of women in both images (as objects of the male gaze), Agamben focuses on how their confident *appearance* unmakes the myth of the Fall, showing that denudation unveils nothing. In Newton's diptych nothing is revealed, nothing but fashion's endless promise of delivering and designing fashionable clothes. As Agamben suggests, there is nothing left to be unveiled by denudation: 'nudity has not taken place'; 'the models *wear their nudity* in exactly the same way that [...] they wear their attire'.[159]

And yet, our discussion on nudity via Agamben does not suggest that denudation is rendered redundant; on the contrary, it underlines how its use and significance consists of showing that there is nothing to denude, nothing hidden to reveal and nothing on the other side to hope for. In this respect, Bataille's two key movements of accessing (and showing us) the truth – namely, laying bare and masking, denuding and duplicating – amount to showing the disguise. Bataillean nudity consists of pure appearance, pure visibility and presence – and is, as a result, horrific. The mystery of nudity, like the mystery of beauty, consists after all of the lack of mystery: standing for nothing else, it signifies nothing but itself; and yet, despite – or precisely due to – its straightforwardness, it takes hold of us. To put it another way, sheer presence does not equal transparency but the impenetrable. In this regard, Bataille's comment about Manet's *Olympia* (her 'exactitude provocante', against the artifice of naturalism and her majesty, her pure charm and straightforward humanity) allows us to understand how the nudity of his own text (and of Edwarda) work:

> sa nudité (s'accordant il est vrai à celle du corps) est le silence qui s'en dégage comme celui d'un navire échoué, d'un navire vide : ce qu'elle est, est l'horreur sacrée de sa présence – d'une présence dont la simplicité est celle de l'absence […]. C'est la précision d'un charme à l'état pur, celui de l'existence ayant souverainement,

[159] Ibid. 80 (my emphasis).

> silencieusement tranché le lien qui la rattachait aux mensonges que l'éloquence avait créés. [160]

Nudity and masking do not conform to a relation of opposition, but bring forth a double relation, as the wearer of the mask is both himself and another, or rather neither himself nor another. In Hegelian terms, the mask, rather than the fictive death of the dialectically suppressed, advances a fiction of death (as it is a display of endurance without future – with no end, or ending). The mask is not a mask *of* something but pure masking, masking as such. In psychoanalytic terms, the mask points to and brings back fiction as the return of the repressed. As the operation of masking is the literary operation, the latter consists not in the presentation of presentation, but in the display of fiction as fiction. Fiction, etymologically deriving from *fingere*, that is, to form and shape, but also to pretend and feign, shows how formation partakes of pretence.

The mask can be approached through the Derridean contrivance of mimesis without imitation. Commenting on Mallarmé's text 'Mimique', Derrida argues that in Mallarmé's text the mimic (Paul Marguerite) does not imitate his act (Pierrot Assassin de sa Femme).[161] There is no imitation, says Derrida, as there is nothing to imitate, nothing prior to the act of the mime, no anterior referent, no thematic content, no event to be imitated. In this sense, the face of the mimic – in its whiteness – parallels the blank page of writing.[162] Yet, and this is the core of Derrida's argument, this does not mean that there is no mimicry, as the mime gives us mimesis as such.[163] The mimic's gestures *are*, in their very emergence, imitative. Therefore, the mimic's act neither points to (imitates) the real nor 'is' (inaugurates) the real in its own right. One can say that the gestures of the mime parallel the Bataillean gesture of writing, as literature, for Bataille, neither 'resembles' the real nor 'is' real.

Advocating the differential structure of literature, Bataille and Blanchot write 'true', 'real' texts, as the double is not suppressed, rendered dialectical: in the case of Blanchot, writing doubles back, folds back on itself, questions itself and finds no answer (undoing thereby the dialectics of question and answer). Bataille puts forward writing as a relation of disguise, and yet a disguise which shows itself as such (undoing thereby the opposition between disguise and

[160] Georges Bataille, *Manet, OC IX*, 142. And elsewhere, we read: 'c'est la majesté retrouvée dans la suppression de ses atours. C'est la majesté de n'importe qui, et déjà de n'importe quoi … – qui appartient, sans plus de cause, à ce qui *est*, et que révèle la force de la peinture'. Bataille, *Manet*, 147.
[161] Jacques Derrida, 'La double séance', in *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972, 1993).
[162] Ibid. 239–40.
[163] Ibid. 254–7.

authenticity). Blanchot brings into representation, into the represented space of literature, the material limitations and the spatial properties of writing (its fundamental deficiency, its being always other to itself), whereas for Bataille, in literature nothing is represented but representation itself, staging and performance. And while for Blanchot what recurringly returns is the anonymous murmur of wor(l)dly existence, for Bataille what recurrently returns is the inescapabilty of disguise.

Conclusion

Toutefois, le travail et la recherche littéraires – gardons ce qualitatif – contribuent à ébranler les principes et les vérités abrités par la littérature.
(Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*)

Tout problème en un certain sens en est un d'emploi du temps. Il implique la question préalable : – Qu'ai-je à faire (que dois-je faire ou qu'est-il est de mon intérêt de faire ou qu'ai-je envie de faire) ici (en ce monde où j'ai ma nature humaine et personnelle) et maintenant ? Écrivant, je voulais toucher le fond des problèmes. Et m'étant donné cette occupation, je me suis endormi.
(Georges Bataille, *Méthode de méditation)*

The contrivance of the 'literary real', bringing together the literary and the real, attempts to make inoperative the hiatus between the conceptual and the sensuous, the conscious and the immediate, form and matter and, at last, fiction and truth. The component of the 'real' designates a resistance and an irreducibility to fictionality and textuality and therefore all discursivity and conceptual determination as such, while the 'literary' attests to an insistence on the question of literature as such. Literature, as has been shown throughout this discussion, becomes a way of addressing – and relating to – that which escapes the order of representation, presence, consciousness and knowledge. The literary, though it partakes of language, runs against the discursive and notional logic (the logic according to which concepts are adequate accounts of the world); in doing so, it also goes against the world bound to and produced by such a logic (the day world of utility and reason).

In this regard, literature, especially in Blanchot's conception of it, can be paralleled to the Husserlian *epoche*, with the crucial difference that the suspension of the natural attitude now becomes a suspension of worldliness. As literature comes to stand for our relation to some kind of otherness (which manifests itself in the variants of the unknown, the obscure, the distant and the unfamiliar), it allows a rethinking of worldly relationality as always already preceded and passing through a radical relation of non-relation, which makes relationality possible as such. Thus, literature enable us not only to think anew worldly relationality without recourse to substance, presence, fusion (briefly, all sort of metaphysical groundedness) but also brings about an ethical affirmation of a relation (without relation). Indeed, each of Blanchot's redefinitions of literature – in terms of the 'il y a', the image, the neuter – calls for, accordingly, a reconfiguration of our relation to existence – in terms of extreme affirmation (rather than negation), dissimulation (rather than unveiling), strangeness and intimacy (rather than sameness or radical otherness). In parallel, the terms adopted in order to designate Bataille's

model of literature, namely ex-scription, simulacrum, withdrawal and the mask, either by way of reintroducing some sort of referentiality or by insisting on both the crisis and the inescapability of representation and figuration, go against a relation of adequation, coincidence, equivalence and, above all, identification (be it, between the literary text and its subject matter).

The relation between the literary and the real moves neither towards the glorification of literature and, more broadly, art (adopting the elite standpoint of a closed-off aestheticism), nor towards the fetishization of the real as irrecuperable, inaccessible, ineffable (adopting the quietistic standpoint of a world-renouncing passivity). As neither term has priority over the other, art is neither at the third remove, as in Plato, nor at the forefront, as in Romanticism, unrivalled and delighting in its capacity of auto-production and self-realization (of both the subject and the artwork). The literary demand, throughout this discussion, both rivals and complements the demands of the real, and vice versa: the question of literature's existence brings into question worldly existence, in the case of Blanchot, whereas the conception of the real in terms of excess exerts pressure on literature and more broadly on forms of representation, in the case of Bataille. As both Bataille and Blanchot are concerned with and foster the unplanned and the unexpected, the surprising and the unanticipated, the intersection between literature and the real is thought over as an encounter, to designate the element of chance and wonder that goes along with it. Additionally, the encounter is considered critical, inasmuch it enacts a crisis – a crisis of representation and of subjectivity.

The re-evaluation of the real in terms of flux and becoming, while following the Nietzschean overcoming of being in terms of substance, essence, presence, does not yield to a comforting rejoicing of undecidability or a firm belief in the continuous plasticity of the world – ready, thereby, to offer itself to be appropriated and shaped by a determined subject. On the contrary, the real is, as shown throughout this study, approached in terms of resistance and withdrawal. The real is firstly thought along the lines of materiality: in its material capacity, it requires us to address things in their distinctive existence (in their preconceptual singularity), rethink ourselves as vulnerable subjects (rather than as disembodied agents) and approach others in their opacity (rather than as transparent objects of our consciousness). Alongside its dimension of materiality, the real also has the Lacanian connotation of that which defies conceptual specification and resists symbolization. Or, to use an optical metaphor, which brings its dimension of the unbearable closer to Bataille's favoured figure of the sun, the real is thought of as what cannot be looked at directly – or more precisely as that which might be looked at only fleetingly (rather than for a long time).

The engagement of both thinkers with the question of the real is entangled with the question of origin – as a prior moment, a primal and more fundamental state is entailed in their respective approaches to the real. Blanchot's tenacious search for the moment that precedes literature leads to the 'il y a', a state prior to ontology and being-in-the-world and more final than dialectics and worldly action. Similarly, one finds in Bataille an enduring longing for a primal state of excessive continuity that escapes the separateness of discontinuous beings and the confinements of individuality. And yet, as has been argued throughout this discussion, the origin, in both Bataille and Blanchot, is finally offered as a fleeting point of contact rather than as something to hold on to. The logic of encounter displaces the logic of origin, with the former coming to designate precisely that which overturns the notion of origin – be it in its spatial account, as a ground, in its temporal dimension, as a beginning, in its aesthetic and canonical dimension, as an original. Additionally, the term encounter here is not used in its traditional sense, as that of two separate, distinct, well-defined entities, but as that which undoes the logic of autonomy, enacting a double logic, which precisely prevents oneself from being properly oneself.

The logic of encounter is that of double (rather than one-sided) dissymmetries, confusions (that run counter to all fusional and unitary logic) and (re)turns (where re-turning is not meant as a re-turn *to* but as that which rubs out the point of departure). Briefly, throughout this study, encounter is put forward as that which undoes the logic of harmonious coexistence and coherence (being at one) as well as the logic of identity (being or becoming oneself) in its various constellations of origin, autonomy, (self)authorship and (self)productivity. The impossibility of negation (the excess of presence as signalled in the 'il y a' and in 'unemployed negativity'), the impossibility of presence (the absenting of presence as brought forth by the 'image' and the 'instant') and finally the impossibility of properly relating (in the case of the 'neuter' and the 'mask') – namely, the impossibility of not-being (in Part I), the impossibility of being, in Part II) and finally the impossibility of being oneself (in Part III) – all attest to a double logic. Against the dialectic of opposites, in the logic of the double terms are together (rather than opposed) and result in constant (unresolvable) tension (rather than in resolution), as in their entanglement they undermine and interrupt (rather than balance) each other.

All of Blanchot's spatial accounts of literature – as inescapably divided between two slopes (Chapter 2), as a tensional space between being and non-being (Chapter 4) and as synonymous to the indeterminate zone of the neuter (Chapter 7) – sketch the mode of existence of literature in terms of a fundamental duplicity, which, in its turn, undoes every attempt to confine

existence in terms of unity, identity, sameness and origin. In parallel, the terms that are used in order to address and approach Bataille's model of literature display an irresolvable tension (an irreducible doubleness) that undoes the economy of sameness as well as that of exchange: the terms of exscription and simulacrum (Chapter 1) overturn the antithesis between inside and outside, original and copy, respectively; the notions of the instant and withdrawal (Chapter 5) undermine both presence and absence, while the mask, concurrently showing and hiding a face (Chapter 8) suspends the opposition between visibility and invisibility, veiling and unveiling. The lexicon of initial division and originary torsion, in Blanchot, precludes any horizon of Being, while the terminology of masks and simulacra, in Bataille, outsteps every aspiration of an authentic existence.

Throughout this study, by way of the key notion of the encounter, a model of communication has been put forward that defies unity (be it dialectical progression or mystical fusion) and redefines connection as always bound with separation. The logic of encounter is that of a double relation, which undoes the order of hierarchy and opposition as well as fantasies of fusion and self-productivity (be it of the self or of the artwork). Blanchot's consideration of Orpheus as the emblematic figure of the writer renders turning towards and turning away the prevailing movement and shows how contact is always bound up with distance. Similarly, the Bataillean conceptualization of communication as synonymous to subjectivity recasts both in terms of linkage and leakage, (over)flowing and rupture.

Confronting Bataille and Blanchot not only with the demand of the real, a current demand of new French thought, but also with older concerns, such as that of truth, representation and subjectivity, shows that the ongoing legacy of Bataille and Blanchot is that notions of subjectivity, truth and representation are not completely abolished and invalidated but rather, and perhaps more crucially, thrown into confusion and problematized. In this respect, both thinkers keep reminding us that subverting such precepts is not a finished task but an endless process of which we need to be a part, as readers and commentators who run into and critically engage not only with their texts but also with the texts of others that, whether coming before or after them, both accompany and haunt them – and us.

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